

**Memory and Identity in the Novels of Amitav Ghosh's
The Shadow Lines and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go***

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Abstract: The present paper focuses on Memory and Identity in the novels of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. Both the authors focus on memory and identity in their works. Memorizations, Identity, nostalgia, mourning, belongingness and liminality are the major concerns in their works. Whereas Ishiguro settled in Britain, Amitav Ghosh is in America. Both recall their memory and identity with their works. In these selected novels they demonstrate the significance of memory and identity through the characters.

Keywords : Noveel; Amitav Ghosh

After the II World War, the novels of Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor, and Amitav Ghosh are considered as postcolonial works, where identity, diaspora, memory are mainly focused. Among these writers, Amitav Ghosh is immensely influenced by the political and cultural milieu of post-independent India. His novels project Indian heritage, tradition, cultural past and present and moral values. Being a social anthropologist, he comments on the present scenario the world is passing through in his novels. Cultural fragmentation, colonial and neo-colonial power structures, cultural degeneration, the materialistic offshoots of modern civilization, dying of human relationships, blending of facts and fantasy, memorization, search for Identity, diasporas, etc... are the major preoccupations in the writings of Amitav Ghosh.

In his works, multiracial and multiethnic issues are shown as a wandering cosmopolitan he roves around and weaves them with his narrative beauty. In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh makes the East and West meet on a pedestal of friendship, especially through the characters like Tridib, May, Nice Prince etc. He stresses more on the globalization rather than nationalization. The novel beautifully showcases human identity and memory and also examines the discourse of borders, lines and nations. The book gives very strong and important message on how the borders demarcating the nations have begun to demarcate the people as well. It elaborates on the fact that these lines should hold no meaning and one should search for a land without borders, where there is no discrimination, no hatred and where there is only place for peace and harmony. The same notion we have in Sanskrit "SARVEJANAH SUKHINO BHAVANTU"¹ and "VASUDHAIVA KUTUMBAKAM."² Ghosh handles this delicate subject beautifully.

Sahitya Akademy Award winning novel *The Shadow Lines* is a diasporic fiction written by Amitav Ghosh. We find all the diasporic features especially in characters like Thamma, Tribib and Illa. The novel is set in Calcutta of 1960s and the

story moves between Calcutta, Dhaka and London. Amitav Ghosh writes a story of post-portion Indian, of divided Bengal, to interrogate identity construction in a violent society. This novel rose from the writer's memory in response to the apocalyptic happenings in 1984 (Indira Gandhi's assassination and the riots). Ghosh tries to discover the meaning of such events and their effects on the individuals who live through them. In this process, remembering and reconstituting the part through selective and fragmentary memory, becomes central to the work.

Amitav Ghosh chooses to tell a story that pervades through the seams of reality and fiction, of time and space, of memories, identities and beliefs. Brinda Bose admirably sums up the significance of memory and identity in Ghosh novel *The Shadow Lines* in *New Orientation of Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Perspective*:

Ghosh fiction takes upon itself the responsibility of re-assert in its troubled antecedents, using history (past and memory) as a tool by which we can begin to make sense of or at least come to terms with our troubling present. (92)

1. "SARVA SUKHINO BHAVANTU, SARVA JANAH SUKHINO BHAVANTU, LOKAH SAMASTA SUKHINO BHAVANTU" (Sanskrit) poetically translated: May all beings be fulfilled, may all beings be healed and whole, may all beings have their needs met, may all beings be protected from harm, may all beings be at peace, may all beings be free. From the *Brihadaraanyaka Upanishad* 1.4.14 (also called the
2. "VASUDHAIVA KUTUMBAKAM" (Sanskrit: from "VASUDHA", the earth; "IVA" = is as a; and "KUTUMBAKAM", family) is a Sanskrit phrase that means that the whole world is one single family. The concept originates in the *Maha Upanishad* (Chapter 6, Verse 72).

The Shadow Lines deals with the theme of partition past and memory. In this novel, the orthodox Bengali family is depicted in three stages before and after partition in recent times. This novel is divided into two parts "Going away" and "Home coming". The first part "Going away" deals with the family's exit from Dhaka to Calcutta during the crucial riot days of partition and the second part "Home coming" deals with the grandmother's futile attempt to rescue her only living uncle Jathomoshai from their ancestral home in Dhaka which is occupied by Muslim refugees.

Memory / memorization functions as a legacy inheritance and prized possession. It becomes nostalgia. Exile and displacement are the main reasons for memory, memorization and nostalgia. Therefore nostalgia/ memory and the theme of identity and lost home, play an important role which explores the theme of an original home. This original home loses mainly due to the exilic condition. For this reason, characters always long for this original home. In *The Shadow Lines*, grandmother Thamma is always in memory / nostalgic of Dhaka, where his original home was situated, but now it is occupied by the Muslim refugees. Even the unnamed narrator understands that, those people who have host their original home always think about that home. He says: "People like my grandmother who have no home but in memory, learn to be very skilled in the art of recollection." The Grandmother always thinks of going back to visit his original childhood home. She imaginative return to their childhood home captures one of the central themes in memorization of the original country (home) haunts the space of exile.

The trauma of partition has made territorial integrity the defining aspect of the health of the nation. Thamma is shocked when she is told that there is no physical manifestation of border dividing India from Bangladesh. Though physically absent, the shadow lines have unalterably divided Bengal. The arbitrariness of boundaries created by colonizers has constituted national identities that define themselves in opposition to each other. The dialectic of 'self' and 'other' emerges (Bhabha, K Homi) which is further reinforced by intervention of religion and culture resulting in self affirmation through violence.

The 'glass' and 'mirror' imagery recurs in the novel and emerges as constitutions of identity through the act of comparison or contrast. Foucault in his article "Of Other Spaces" presents the mirror as a 'placeless place' with reflects society as prefect or else as a society turned 'upside down', reminiscent of Thamma's imaginative definition of 'upside down' (125) house of Jethamoshai. 'Self' gets constructed either in relation to or in opposition of the 'other' guided by either admiration or disaffection. The narrator observes that Nick Price had become "...a spectral presence

beside me in my looking glass; growing with me, but always bigger and better and in some way more desirable" (50). Nick emerges as an ideal to measure up to, till the narrator is demystified after meeting him in London (*Crossing Borders: Post 1980 Subcontinental Writing in English*, 174).

The Shadow Lines explores the outbreak of communal riots on both sides of the border in order to question and examine the nature of the identity of multitudes. The 'self' as it emerges a owing to the reviewing of the past, both personal and historical, when faced with violence in the crisis situation becomes the object of critical scrutiny.

The act of remembering is foregrounded and problematized in the work. The unnamed narrator is confronted by the shifting boundaries of memory when past and present confronted and ramify till it seems multilayered and multifaceted. In the process of remembering the past, the narrator constantly transgresses the boundary between the real and the imagined. This fragmented memory stands in opposition to total recall. The narrator remembers how, as an eight year old, he had tried to imagine Tridib at the same age. Baffled, he had 'decided' then Tridib had looked like him. Factual details are coloured and at times manipulated by the narrator as he reconstructs the past aided by memory and imagination.

The Shadow Lines is a novel in which Amitav Ghosh has been able to realize the cultural conception through an art form, which is cohesive. Amitav writes using stream of consciousness technique which makes it easy for the reader to associate and attack with the story. *The Shadow Lines* lies in the genre of what is known as a memory novel where the content of the entire novel is derived from the memory of characters. Ghosh constantly moves forward and backward creating a zigzag like pattern contributing to the complex structure of the novel.

For Amitav Ghosh, language in the process of the production of art attains the status of diasporic representation – voicing him and thousands of other uprooted individuals. Language embodies the attempt to create family that has broken and dispersed in the mire of confused identity. Ghosh acknowledges it in *The Shadow Lines*:

You see, in our family we don't know whether we're coming or going – it's all my grandmother's fault. But of course, the fault wasn't hers at all: it lay in the 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. (*The Shadow Lines*, 153)

This is a language that Ghosh believes in and this kind of language he tries to create in his work.

Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki in 1954 and went with his family to the small town England, when he was five. He didn't return to Japan for twenty-nine years. At twenty-seven he published his first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), set largely in Nagasaki, to near unanimous praise. His second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), won Britain's prestigious Whitbread award. And his third, *The Remains of the Day* (1989), sealed his international fame. It sold more than a million copies in English, won the Booker Prize, and was made into a Merchant Ivory movie starring Anthony Hopkins, with a screenplay by Ruth Prawer Jhabvala. (An earlier script by Harold Pinter, Ishiguro recalls, featured "a lot of game being chopped up on kitchen boards") Ishiguro was named an Officer of the Order of the British Empire and, for a while, his portrait hung at 10 Downing Street. Defying consecration, he surprised readers with his next novel, *The Unconsoled* (1995), more than five hundred pages of what appeared to be stream-of-consciousness. Some baffled critics savaged it; James Wood wrote that "it invents its own category of badness." But others came passionately to its defense, including Anita Brookner, who overcame her initial doubts to call it "almost certainly a masterpiece." The author of two more acclaimed novels—*When We Were Orphans* (2000) and *Never Let Me Go* (2005)—Ishiguro has also written screenplays and teleplays, and he composes lyrics, most recently for the jazz chanteuse Stacey Kent. Their collaborative CD, *Breakfast on the Morning Tram*, was a best-selling jazz album in France.

The novel begins with Kathy's memorization speech; this word focuses of her memory with career and her life and her past.

My name is Kathy H. I'm 28 years old. I've been a Career for 9 years. And I'm good at my job. My patients always do better than expected and hardly ever classified as agitated, even if they're about to make a donation. I'm not trying to boast, but I feel a great sense of pride in what we do. Carers and Donors have achieved so much. In the end it wears you down. I suppose that's why I now spend most of my time not looking forwards, but looking back. To the Cottages and Hailsham and what happened to us there, me, Tommy and Ruth. (1)

The novel takes place in a contra-factual version of England in the late 1990s. As such the novel essentially belongs to the science fiction genre although this is hardly the thematical focus

of the book. The protagonist and narrator of *Never Let Me Go* is Kathy H. The story is told through her recollection of her memory stay at Hailsham, which appears to be a regular, English boarding school. Life at Hailsham revolves around art and usual teenage concerns, creating what is apparently an almost normal upbringing for Kathy and her two closest friends, Tommy and Ruth. The gradually unraveling truth behind the matter is that Kathy and her friends at Hailsham are clones, brought up to donate their vital organs to "normal" people. Kathy is at the point of telling the story of a carer, tending to active donors and waiting to become a donor herself. As a character, Kathy H., like Christopher Banks, tries to make sense of her childhood experiences. The fact that her life is predetermined is reflected and memorized in her character. As is the case with most of the clones, Kathy seems strangely neutral and inert, having maybe already accepted her destiny at some subconscious level. Kathy also recalls her past with these words; "It had never occurred to me that our lives, so closely interwoven, could unravel with such speed. If I'd known, maybe I'd have kept tighter hold of them". She always thinks with her past and present which is more important in the novel.

The only character trait that seems to set her apart from her fellow clones is her objectivity and serenity towards her life and inescapable future. It may be these unique traits that have made her tell the story as it appears in the novel. As opposed to Kathy, the character of Ruth has a tendency to let go of her past. Ruth was Kathy's best friend and Tommy's girlfriend at Hailsham, but on a very basic level she is different from them. Later in her life she claims to have forgotten many of their common memories, maybe as an attempt to leave behind the happy, carefree past that puts her current situation into a grim perspective. Through this denial, Hailsham is slowly disappearing out of her conscience.

At the end, Ruth appears as a weak character compared to Kathy and Tommy, both mentally and physically. Maybe this frailty is a result of her letting go of her past life. Another possible cause for her frailty may be her secret realization of how perfect Kathy and Tommy are for each other—which is eating her up. Tommy seems to be the black sheep at Hailsham. He has a hard time controlling his temper, which might be interpreted as a reaction to his sub-conscious knowledge of his future. Tommy is more contemplative than the average student at Hailsham. He keeps pondering over what to make of the things that Miss Lucy tells him. Piecing together the mysterious incidents that occur from time to time is a common concern for Tommy and Kathy.

Still Kathy recalls her past with these words "I come here and imagine that this is the spot where everything I've lost since my childhood

is washed out. I tell myself, if that were true, and I waited long enough then a tiny figure would appear on the horizon across the field and gradually get larger until I'd see it was Tommy. He'd wave. And maybe call. I don't know if the fantasy goes beyond that, I can't let it. I remind myself I was lucky to have had any time with him at all. What I'm not sure about, is if our lives have been so different from the lives of the people we save. We all complete. Maybe none of us really understand what we've lived through, or feel we've had enough time." Through her memory, she identifies herself in the past how she came up to adulthood. She remembers her identity among students and teachers. The whole novel works on the memory and identity. And Kathy stays in everyone's hearts.

Conclusion

These two novels mainly focus on the concepts of memory and identity through their characters. All characters in these novels focus on the past and nostalgia which are important to construct one's identity. All the characters are introduced in relation to the main protagonists, the

consciousness which forms the centre of the narrative. Ghosh and Ishiguro write along with a stream of consciousness which makes it easy to associate the past and present memory in these works. Ghosh is best known for his effort to recuperate and represent the silent voices of major historical events and project that side of an incident which never gets voiced. In *Never Let Me Go*, Characters trait that seem to set apart from the fellow clones as their objectivity and serenity towards their life and inescapable future. It may be these unique traits that have made them to tell the story as it appears in the novel. The words have such a lyrical feeling despite the fact that they all come from memory.

Memory, even if it is an imagined identity, imparts courage and strength to face the chaos of the postmodern present. In this sense, Ghosh and Ishiguro's concerns are significant. The process of transition from the past to the present is never easy for any individual or community. Hence, memorization, recollection is a strategy of historicification of the agency.

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