

Cultural Poetics in *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract: Contrary to many older interpretive methods and schools that tend to see historical and literary texts as autonomous entities, Stephen Greenblatt's New Historical approach Cultural Poetics seeks to reveal the relationship between texts and their socio historical contexts. Cultural Poetics assumes that texts not only document the social forces that inform and constitute history and society but also feature prominently in the social processes themselves which fashion both individual identity and the socio historical situation. Focusing upon New Historicism as an approach to analyze the novel *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh, the paper examines how the author highlighted nostalgia through the suffering of the book characters. The way the author incorporated historical events in fictional writing is also explored. Ghosh has won many accolades for his fiction which is intertwined with history. His appeal for a borderless universe and his penchant for recovering lost histories come together in *The Shadow Lines*.

Key words: Cultural poetics, New Historicism, Stephan Greenblatt, Amitav Ghosh

1. Introduction –Cultural Poetics

Stephen Greenblatt is largely considered to be one of the founders of New Historicism – coined the term **Cultural Poetics** in the early 1980s. Greenblatt's New Historicism has a number of anomalies of its own, foremost among them being that historians cannot objectively represent the past because they cannot separate themselves from the circumstances which produced them. The phrase that he uses to express this interconnectedness is the historicity of texts and the textuality of history. In other words, all writing is culturally or historically specific, and all history is not some stable, objective entity but rather like a literary text itself.

Another key point that he stresses as an integral aspect of New Historicism is the need for people and especially for literary critics to be aware of their own historicity, of the fact that all are historical subjects. And as such, one's own personal histories (social, cultural, institutional vantage points) shape the way in which they view and relate to the world around them. As all are historical subjects and there is no stepping outside of or distancing themselves from history.

One can never find or establish any sort of stable, universal, authentic meaning in whatever it is that they are studying. Thus, the text is historically specific; the meaning of the text is not stable.

The New historicism sees the texts as embedded in cultural-social context, hegemony as power of dominant culture, culture as means of formalizing power and institutions. It treats culture as capital for making the power more abstract, as means influencing people by education, communication, publicity, mobilizing armies and police force for breaking the power of other cultures. Texts are cultural because of social values and contexts. If an exploration of a particular culture will lead to heightened understanding of a work of literature produced within that culture, so too a careful reading of a work of literature will lead to heightened understanding of the culture within which it was produced.

Literary study helps in Cultural Understanding. Art is an important agent in the transmission of culture. If culture functions as a structure of limits, it also functions as the regulator and guarantor of movement. Indeed the limits are virtually meaningless without movement; it is only through improvisation, experiment, and exchange that cultural boundaries can be established. So, novels not only reflect the notion of constraint and mobility; they help to shape, articulate and reproduce it through their own improvisatory intelligence.

Great writers are precisely masters of these codes, specialists in cultural exchange. Writers take symbolic material from one zone of the culture and move them to another, augmenting their emotional force, altering their significance linking them with other materials taken from a different zone and changing their place in a larger social design. Ever since the time of chronicles, history has assumed interesting dimensions in Western literature and Indian literature alike. Writers brought to life historical figures and events in their works. In the novels of Amitav Ghosh, history as an indispensable reality is an integral quality. Through a re-reading of the past, Ghosh engages in a postcolonial re-interpretation of life. A re-examination of history widens the historical perspective, attempting a holistic approach to history and literature that deals with cultures.

1. Adroit Writings of Amitav

Amitav Ghosh's writing is a combination of post modern vision and continuation of narrative techniques of Indian epic tradition. Ghosh uses English language deftly, covering a larger canvass of emotional, political, cultural, geographical and historical issues. There is gusto of creativity, vigor and hope in his approach. He has set his premise of writings around various socio-political and cultural issues that emerged in post independent India.

Amitav Ghosh's success as a historical novelist owes much to the distinctiveness of his well researched narrative. It brings a bygone era and vanished experiences to life through vividly realized detail. Ghosh's fiction is characterized by strong themes that may be identified as historical novels. His themes involve emigration, exile, cultural displacement and uprooting. He illuminates the basic ironies, deep seated ambiguities and existential dilemmas of human condition. Ghosh matures gradually in a distinctive style of his own with the growth of his works. He continues to be a strong voice among contemporary literary artists and thinkers. He has carved out a unique niche for himself by embracing new genres, styles and subjects.

Ghosh has emerged as a prominent writer with the force of sheer verisimilitude and versatility. Besides, a vast range of characters lend a quality of cosmopolitanism to his subject. His issues are local and global. Ghosh is conscious of the role of an author. His views on society, language, culture, human relationship, nation and geographical boundaries are all painted with this beliefs. These ideologies also determine his choices as a craftsman of storytelling.

Ghosh's method of narration which keeps on shifting from first person narration to the third person narration is amalgamated with magic realism, linguistic innovations, play with the concept of time, history and digressions that all make his writing postmodern. AS a trained Anthropologist and Researcher, Ghosh has a long association with subaltern studies group, and academics in both the West and in India. The revealed style and technique of Ghosh is embossed in his second novel *The Shadow Lines*. With this outlook here is an analysis on New Historicism in *The Shadow Lines*.

Ghosh's second novel, *The Shadow Lines*, was published in 1988, four years after the sectarian violence that shook New Delhi in the aftermath of the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi's assassination. The novel probes the various facets of violence and the extent to which its fiery arms reach under the guise of fighting for freedom.

3. Fictional Episodes and History

Amitav Ghosh's historical world is one of restless narrative motions. His central figures are travelers and diasporic exiles. He treats national borders and conceptual boundaries as permeable fictions to be constantly transgressed. Through the multiple cross crossing, discrete binaries of order and category give way to a realm of mirror images and hybrid realities. Reason becomes passion; going away is also coming home and the differences between us and them, now and then, here and there are disrupted by the itinerant maps of a roaming imagination.

The novel also highlights nostalgia, which is an intrinsic part of history. The characters suffer a sense of loss and isolation. They are always hankering after the past, for those days and for those places that are no longer traceable. For example, reminiscences of her childhood in Dhaka keep haunting Tha'mma, who has been living in Calcutta for about two decades. For her, Calcutta can never be Dhaka which used to be her home. Events are reconstructed, often as accurately and as carefully as any historian, putting real people in imaginary situations, and fancy conditions in documentary narratives, augmenting the significance of historical events by plausible and internally consistent depictions and at the same time they seem to register only the fictive aspect of the stories and, consequently, dismiss the history which is connected with them.

As Ghosh recounts his tale of past events, he takes us to the time in which he personally enters the historical chain of events. His interest in history and a rich mixture of facts and fiction are so intense that the reader visits and revisits the places and events. The result of the researched aspects of the past is not an improbable fantasy but a work of imagination also. In all his writing, Amitav Ghosh's engagement with history is not the same kind as that of a regular historian, but this does not, in any way, lessen its significance as historical fiction. The fictional framework renders history more readable and lively and he is able to involve the reader more than what actual history does.

Ghosh's fiction reveals that the novelist's involvement with history is his prime obsession. Indeed, he interjects a new dimension into his encounter with history. His fiction is imbued with both political and historical consciousness. Ghosh is thus a novelist who virtually bends his novels to the needs of history; they largely derive their purpose and shape from it. In the

particular context of 1947, the questions of religion and ethnic identities allegedly became the central determinants of privilege— that the ‘we’ of Indian nationalism can be trusted as true nationalists whereas the other part can never be lifted out of the suspects, even after years of allegiance. It has not taken its place “on the frontier” only but right “inside” (151), amidst the people of India- a live memory.

Such misplacing and change of identity did not take any time- but it just dawned on them. They were entrapped in this new periphery and could not lift it up any way. This silent acquiescence is on a par with the loud exclaim as Tha'mma wonders in a shocked tone having come to know about the India-Bangladesh borders' normalcy- “What was it all for then- partition and all the killing and everything – if there is not something in between?”(151). She finds ‘no trenches, no soldiers pointing guns at each other...’ (TSL: 151). This naïve belief in borders is reflective of nation's definition as limited. Her dilemma is consonant with the central confusion of all nationalisms. Thus, the borders are mere shadow lines or mirage only. Tha'mma is informed that this Partition is rather embodied in “disembarkation cards” (151) and visa formalities instead of being on land. Partition not only took lives, it also betrayed hopes and deceived people of their dreams. It disillusioned people. Therefore, Tha'mma could never forgive history for the things that it denied her, “...the unity of nationhood and territory, ... the self respect and national power... like all the modern middle classes the world over...”(TSL:78)

Amitav Ghosh's novels have historical events written in the fictional language and fictional matter treated as history thus giving the effect of presence and absence of history at the same time .The public chronicles of nations are interrogated by highlighting on the one hand the reality of the fiction people create around their lives and on the other hand by recording the veritable graphic details of individual memories that do not necessarily tally with the received version of history. For instance, the narrator himself is a witness to the riots in Calcutta in 1964, but when he tries to prove it to his colleagues using the traditional medium of recording history – i.e., the newspaper – he initially meets with disappointment. There is no visible record of the narrator's mnemonic history.

In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator's personality merges with that of the historian on one hand and on the other hand after a passage of time, he is no more physically present in them. For him the past exists only in memory and has no visible traces left in the present to go by. The only

resources, which the narrator-historian possesses to graft history, are memories, photographs, and Tridib's stories which are difficult to dismiss because they are factually correct yet set in a medium of fiction.

The events are reconstructed, often as accurately and as carefully as any historian, putting real people in imaginary situations, and fancy conditions in documentary narratives, augmenting the significance of historical events by plausible and internally consistent depictions and at the same time they seem to register only the fictive aspect of the stories and, consequently, dismiss the history which is connected with them.

The writer is interested in going beyond the limited information written in history books and political occurrence to the myriad of human relationships and people that are affected by historical events. History is made subjective and each character articulates historical accounts through his or her own personal experience. As he writes the novel, the narrator wrestles with a chronological view of history, passed on by the ruling English and now part of the Indian national consciousness. The act of creating and writing down of history then becomes an ideological act, designed to support political and moral systems.

4. The New Historicist Approach

New historicist approach concerns itself not only with the big and paramount national matters like partition and communal frenzy but also with political matters and international events of the past. The inscrutable and transcendental issues like the indivisible sanity, religion and alienation, themes of detachment and isolation become part of it. The search for freedom, passion for social justice and deep concern for the individual liberty in an increasingly collectivized society are very well represented in such works.

New Historicism is a literary theory based on the idea that literature should be studied and interpreted within the context of both the history of the author and the history of the critic. Based on the literary criticism of Stephen Greenblatt and influenced by the philosophy of Michel Foucault, New Historicism acknowledges not only that a work of literature is influenced by its author's times and circumstances, but that the critic's response to that work is also influenced by his environment, beliefs, and prejudices.

A New Historicist looks at literature in a wider historical context, examining both how the writer's times affected the work and how the work reflects the writer's times, in turn recognizing that current cultural contexts color that critic's conclusions. The New Historicist also acknowledges that his examination of literature is "tainted" by his own culture and environment.

Focusing upon New Historicism as an element of text and history in literary writings, the paper elaborates on the historicist approach to literature as used by the contemporary Indian English writer, Amitav Ghosh, who has won many accolades for his fiction which is intertwined with history. *The Shadow Lines* pictures the narrator's search for connections, for the recovery of lost information or repressed experience, or the details of great trauma or joy that have receded into the archives of public or private memory. The narrator in *The Shadow Lines* summons up an array of recollections in a web of connections. The differences of time and place blur as the process of recollection transforms the past events into a throbbing sense of what has been lost.

Amitav Ghosh by retelling personal histories of Tha'mma's dispersed family in *The Shadow Lines* reveals this process of a 'collective will' obtained to invent a new nation. Ghosh metaphorically presents the common consensus through Tridib as he says, "every one lives in a story, stories are all there to live in ..." (TSL: 182). People like Tha'mma agreed to 'dream' a new nation, believing in the reality of borders beyond which existed another reality, permitting only relationship of 'war and friendship' (TSL: 219). Partition, in the words of Indo-Pak poet Faiz wreaked havoc at an unprecedented level, as he sang in pain – "The blood of how many do you need, o my motherland/ so that you're lusterless cheek may turn crimson? / How many sighs will soothe your heart/ and how many tears make your deserts bloom?" (182)

The historical events carried by the novel includes the freedom movement in Bengal, the Second World War, the Partition of India in 1947, and the spontaneous communal combustion in the form of riots in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and India following the '64 Hazratbal incident in Srinagar. The novel is not a bare and bland recapitulation of those tense historical moments; it captures the trauma of emotional rupture and estrangement as also the damaging potential of the siege within people sundered by bigoted politics. The reconstruction of the past through houses, photographs, maps, road names, newspapers, advertisements and other

concretizations allows us to collate the text with concurrent co-texts and validate the author's perception of the time and milieu covered by the novel.

Summation: An Evaluation of Historical Reality

Thus a historicist approach to text is nothing but an evaluation of a segment of historical reality as projected by the novelist whose techniques of writing fiction enable him or her to describe his or her world-vision. In all his writing, Amitav Ghosh's engagement with history is not the same kind as that of a regular historian, but this does not, in any way, lessen its significance as historical fiction. The fictional framework renders history more readable and lively and he is able to involve the reader more than what actual history does. Ghosh's fiction reveals that the novelist's involvement with history is his prime obsession. Indeed, he interjects a new dimension into his encounter with history. His fiction is imbued with both political and historical consciousness. Ghosh is thus a novelist who virtually bends his novels to the needs of history; they largely derive their purpose and shape from it.

It may be concluded that a re-examination of the historical past in the novels of Amitav Ghosh elucidates a strong inclination of the author towards an illustration of culture and it is found that texts are cultural because of social values. The celebration of ordinary individuals help in the Cultural Understanding of hidden histories.

Ghosh tries to re-interpret and decode the unmapped secrets of history. Ghosh translates the other side of history and projects contributions and experiences of the silent and usually suppressed voices of history. These silent and invisible figures that live far away from the historical figures are widely perceived by Amitav Ghosh as significant characters. His narratives bring the narration closer to individual private history, rather than the country's public history thereby creating a mere commentary of public history. In doing so he projects history of the colonized rather than the colonizer.

The new postmodern and alternative historiographies gives new impetus for historiography and culture, gives new chances for people and diasporas, native people, subaltern people for rewriting history as permanent exchanges of cultural experiences. Thus, The Poetics of Culture depicts about the circulation of social energies and cultures. . Cultural Poetics assumes that texts

not only document the social forces that inform and constitute history and society but also feature prominently in the social processes themselves which fashion both individual identity and the socio historical situation. Greenblatt's interpretation of texts is understood through the private histories narrated in the novels of Amitav Ghosh. Poetics of Culture seeks to reveal the relationship between texts and their socio historical contexts.

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