

ISSN: 0976-8165

# The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Vol. 7, Issue- 4 [August 2016]

*The Criterion* 

## 7th Year of Open Access

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

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## **Travails of Cultural Translation and Fragmented Identity: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines***

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One of the central premises of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is its tryst with the problematic of cultural translation in postmodern times. Three pivotal female characters of the novel Thamma, Ila, and May bear the brunt of cultural dislocation and misappropriation. Their unified being undergoes the rigmarole of social, political, historical upheaval and is transformed into schizoid selves which they find hard to come to terms with. They endeavour to wriggle out of the web of psychic discordance by knitting together jumbled state of their identity which further aggravates their malady. Ghosh's multi-layered narrative deftly weaves together diasporic dilemma of Ila Datta Chaudhuri, postcolonial predicament of Thamma, and cultural incomprehensibility of May Price. Present research paper takes cognizance of the postmodern cultural space of liminality that not only creates fissures in individual identity but also punctures the myth of cultural homogeneity. It endeavours to situate travails of Thamma, Ila and May in the context of Bhabha's notion of cultural heterogeneity/hybridity that has firmly entered the Postmodern world.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is a postmodern narrative of fragmented subjects stuck in the interstitial space of cultural translation. The canvas of the novel is replete with myriad characters sketches both male and female. Female characters, however, acquire a distinct position in the postmodern third space of liminality as they have been "represented as carrying the greatest burden of historical dislocation, and it is their 'missteps' that lead to personal tragedy, as also trace the rocky paths of larger national and international conflicts (Kaul 285)."

One of the central characters of the novel is Thamma, narrator's grandmother, who casts major influence on the psyche of the narrator. Thamma can easily be seen as a case of postmodern schizo-fragmentation, as she finds herself stuck between her colonial past and post-colonial present. She was born in Dhaka in the colonial times when it was part of India, but moved to Burma after her marriage and finally settled in Calcutta. After Partition when Dhaka becomes capital of East Pakistan, Thamma finds herself stuck in the dubious predicament of 'generic discordance' where her place of birth (Dhaka) is in complete anomaly with her nationality (Indian). Commenting on Thamma's inability to come to terms with the idea of geographical borders Arif M. Khan states, "Thamma fails to understand that the border is like a mirror, a looking-glass border, wherein one looks beyond to find self – reflection which mirror conflict and riots for the sake of preserving self-an exercise which seems arbitrary and

meaningless (60).” Drawing of border between India and Pakistan makes her an immigrant in her own place of birth and she has to cross shadowy border at the airport when she is required to fill multiple disembarkation forms while flying to Dhaka. Initially, the fact of partition remains only a political change for Thamma, she feels as much connected to Dhaka as to Calcutta. Though she rarely visits Dhaka after her parents’ death, she always nurtures memory of her paternal house in 1/31 Jindabaha Lane. After many years she leaves for Dhaka in the year 1964 to visit that house and bring her uncle Jethamoshai to India. When she lands at Dhaka airport and is taken to Mayadebi’s house in Dhanmudi, her enthusiasm is slightly dampened looking at the transformed urbanised city of Dhaka. She feels alienated and aloof and keeps saying: “I’ve never seen any of this. Where’s Dhaka?” (Ghosh 194). But the sense of nostalgia soon returns when she visits part of the city that surrounds their old house:

The car turned into a large, bustling square and all of a sudden she gripped Mayadebi’s arm and cried out: Look, Shador-bajar, there’s the Royal Stationery, do you remember? Mayadebi threw an arm around her, and then, holding on to each other, laughing, brushing away tears, they explained to May that they had always shopped for textbooks there when they were schoolgirls. (Ghosh 206)

Thamma’s attachment to Dhaka is unaffected by the fact that she is a foreigner there now as Tridib points out, “You’re as foreign here as May—much more than May, for look at her, she doesn’t even need a visa to come here” (Ghosh 195). Thamma’s psychological alienation from the place of her birth, however, is further intensified by the sight of her paternal house:

The old portico had sprouted a tin shed that was shining in the blaze of a blowtorch as a man worked on a motorcycle’s mudguard. The patch of grass they had once called a garden was now pitted with pools of black oil and strewn with tyre tubes and exhaust pipes.

It was all changed . . . It wasn’t the house she remembered. (Ghosh 208)

Evidently, Thamma’s bewilderment emanates from the fact that “her sense of home and identity are still shaped by her past” (Jia 24). Thamma’s attachment to Dhaka, however, very soon turns into absolute hatred after “Tridib’s killing in an act of ethnic violence” (Butt 4). After that incident she starts believing that Pakistan is a sworn enemy of India. During 1965 India-Pakistan war she becomes so hysterical that narrator is terrified to see her condition: “Her hair was hanging in wet ropes over her face; her eyes were glazed and her spectacles had fallen off. I was frightened by the sight of her (Ghosh 237).” When narrator enquires about her gold chain, the only piece of jewelry she never separates herself from, Thamma angrily reverts, “I gave it to the fund of the war. I had to, don’t you see? For your sake; for your freedom. We have to kill them before they kill us; we have to wipe them out (Ghosh 237).” In her angry vituperative her birthplace and the people living there become ‘other,’ as is clear from the pronouns ‘they’ and ‘them’ as opposed to ‘we’ and ‘us’. Thamma’s trauma is caused not only by the murder of Tridib

and Jethamoshai by the Pakistani mob, but also by the psychological split that she experiences in her unified identity. In her endeavour to hate Pakistan, she inadvertently hates some part of her own being.

Thamma, nevertheless, is not the only character in the novel that undergoes travails of identity crisis, Ila Datta Chaudhuri, also encounters dubious predicament of hyphenated identity. Nivedita Majumdar aptly describes her as “a globetrotting, cosmopolitan activist for politically correct causes (248).” Her father Jatin Datta Chaudhuri works as an Economist with United Nations, for which he is transferred from one country to the other. Ila also moves with her parents all across the globe and later stays for a long duration in London, where major part of her childhood years are spent. She also joins college in London for her higher education. Thus Ila acquires a fragmented identity that is some part Indian and some part British. Her ‘schizoid’ identity makes her anomalous in Indian as well as British cultural milieu. It is Ila’s exotic charm that attracts narrator towards her since childhood. During one of her early childhood visits to Calcutta, narrator is charmed by her English dress and manners: “She was wearing clothes the like of which I had never seen before, English clothes, a white smock with an appliqué giraffe that had its hooves resting on the hem while its neck stretched almost as far up as her chin (Ghosh 43).” Narrator does not like when Ila once dresses herself in a traditional white Bengali Sari:

But as for me, I was disappointed: ever since I could remember, Ila had worn clothes the like of which neither I nor anyone else I knew in Calcutta had ever seen, and here she was now, dressed in a simple white sari with a red border, like any Bethune College girl on her way to a lecture. (Ghosh 18)

Narrator’s obsession with Ila’s hybrid identity is in complete contrast with Thamma’s dislike of her. In her scathful attack on Ila’s character, she calls her “a greedy little slut” living in London for money and comfort (Ghosh 79). Thamma asserts that Ila does not belong to that country (England), so she shouldn’t be there. Thamma believes that If Ila suffers racial discrimination in London, her parents are responsible for it, as they chose to live in a foreign country: “It was Ila’s fault. It was her own fault, and Maya’s fault and the fault of that half-witted mother of hers (Ghosh 77).” The racial discrimination that Ila faces in her school in London is revealed to the narrator by May Price. Even narrator is shocked by this revelation that the fictional story of Magda that Ila tells him while playing ‘house’ under the huge table of Ila’s paternal bungalow in Raibajar, was in fact a concocted version of the real event that Ila experienced in her London school. May relates the happening of the day when Ila was bullied and assaulted by a formidable girl of her class Denise:

Nick didn’t stop to help Ila. He ran all the way back. . . .Nick didn’t want to be seen with Ila. Ila didn’t have any friends in school . . . . Then that day something happened in Ila’s class, and I think Nick got to hear of it. He ran back even earlier than usual and went straight up to his room. . . . An hour or so later, just when we

were beginning to worry about Ila, a policeman brought her back. She was a bit bruised, but otherwise all right. She never told us what happened but she didn't go back to school after that. (Ghosh 76)

Narrator finds it hard to imagine Ila "walking back from school alone through the lanes of West Hampstead," for she is treated no less than a celebrity while she is in Calcutta: "Ila who in Calcutta was surrounded by so many relatives and cars and servants that she would never have had to walk so much as the length of the street" (Ghosh 76). Narrator realises soon enough that Magda of Ila's story was a desired version of Ila herself, the most beautiful girl in the world who is admired by all. Ila's desire of being the most beautiful girl whom everyone likes and wants to befriend is a psychological fetish which gets intensified in the wake of racial discrimination she faces in her school and even at home at the hands of Nick Price who she is madly in love with since her childhood. But Nick Price as a young kid is "ashamed to be seen by his friends, walking home with an Indian" (Ghosh 76).

It is, indeed, this relationship between Ila and Nick Price which further foregrounds problematic of cultural translation. Ila and Nick Price come from different cultural background and their marriage undergoes initial tumult of cross-cultural relationships. For Ila her marriage with Nick Price is realization of a long nurtured romantic dream, but for Nick it is more a marriage of convenience and a bright career prospect. After losing his job in Kuwait Nick finds it difficult to get a new job in London, and when he comprehends the prospect of marrying Ila, daughter of a high ranked Indian diplomat, he immediately grabs the opportunity. Nick's expectations are rightly fulfilled when Ila's father gifts them "a two-bedroom flat on Clapham Common" as a wedding present and arranges for their honeymoon in Africa (Ghosh 154). Nick also nurtures the dream of starting his own textile business in London by importing low-cost readymade clothes from Bangladesh through the influence of Ila's relatives. Nevertheless, Ila's illusion of a happy married life with Nick soon receives a jolt when she gets to know that Nick invites a Martinique woman in their flat in her absence and when Ila confronts him about it he unabashedly admits that "he'd met her in a pub or something and he's been seeing her for a year or so, . . . He's got an Indonesian woman in line too somewhere" and the reason for doing so is simply that "he just likes a bit of variety; it's his way of travelling" (Ghosh 188). Nick's act of adultery with women of different cultural background, however, can also be seen "as a sort of erotic re-enactment of his own frustrated cosmopolitanism (Hueso 163)." When narrator teases Ila by saying that her "sins have finally come home to roost," she reveals that whatever she used to say during her college years about her libertine ways was not true (Ghosh 188). Most of it was said to shock the narrator, but she never did any of those things and therefore she believes that she is "about as chaste, in my own way, as any woman you'll ever meet" (Ghosh 188).

Ila's personality clearly exhibits a schizoid identity. Her appearance and demeanour is highly liberated, but at heart she is strictly conventional. This dualism of personality makes her a complete misfit both in London and her native place Calcutta. When once she cajoles narrator and Robi to a night club in Calcutta and against Robi's interdiction starts dancing with strangers,

there ensues a verbal spat between Robi and Ila. Robi tries to put his point across by asserting, “You ought to know that; girls don’t behave like that here. . . . You can do what you like in England . . . But here there are certain things you cannot do. That’s our culture; that’s how we live (Ghosh 88).” Robi’s authoritarian attitude shocks Ila and turning in anger and frustration towards narrator she repeatedly shouts, “Do you see now why I’ve chosen to live in London? . . . It’s only because I want to be free. . . . Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you (Ghosh 88-89).” Interestingly Ila calls her own native culture as “your” culture, which brings her closer to the plight of Thamma, who also tries to distance herself from her birthplace Dhaka after Tridib and Jethamoshai’s death.

Cultural translation creates fissures in Individual identity is evident in the predicament of not only Ila but also May Price, another significant female character in the novel. May Price is love interest of Tridib, whose unusual love letter puts May in a quandary. Though May feels disgusted by the unabashed expression of sexual desire in the pornographic letter of Tridib, she cannot help coming to India to comprehend “the mysterious pull” between herself and Tridib (Prasad 74). During their brief courtship in Calcutta, May gets an opportunity to fathom profundity of Tridib’s love for her. But before she could fully understand her own feelings towards Tridib, they set out upon their fateful journey to Dhaka. Years after when narrator meets May in London, he finds her still living under the dubious dilemma whether she is responsible for Tridib’s death or not. She continues to believe that her failure in understanding real nature of communal riots costs Tridib his life, since she admonished Tridib for his cowardice in not getting down the car to save his relative from the rioters: “I thought I’d killed him. I used to think: perhaps he wouldn’t have got out of that car if I hadn’t made him, if I’d understood what I was doing (Ghosh 251).” Coming from a different cultural background May experiences the “horror” of incomprehensibility, which haunts her for quite some time in London (Bhabha 304). May, nevertheless, relives the moment of Tridib’s death when she relates the entire event to narrator and attempts yet again to comprehend the reason that led to Tridib’s ruthless killing at the hands of the rioters:

I was safe you see—I could have gone right into that mob, and they wouldn’t have touched me, an English memsahib, but he, he must have known he was going to die. For years I was arrogant enough to think I owed him his life. But I know now I didn’t kill him; I couldn’t have, if I’d wanted. He gave himself up; it was a sacrifice. I know I can’t understand it, I know I mustn’t try, for any real sacrifice is a mystery. (Ghosh 252)

To understand Tridib’s sacrifice May lives life of a recluse by depriving herself from luxury and comfort. She sleeps on the ground, fasts on Saturdays, and involves herself in social welfare activities. But her real redemption takes place when she realises that she should cease self-abomination and hankering after a mystery which is best left unresolved.

Thamma, Ila and May are woven into the fabric of the novel with a common thread of postmodern thirdness that “opens up an area of ‘interfection’ where the newness of cultural practices and historical narratives are registered in ‘generic discordance’, ‘unexpected juxtaposition’ the ‘semi-automization’ of reality ‘postmodern schizo-fragmentation . . .’ (Bhabha 310-311).” Their fragmented selves create tumult in their psyche and lead to anxieties and hysterias. Sanity is restored only when modernist quest for meaning and solution gives way to postmodernist celebration of discordance and uncertainty.

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