



## EXISTENTIAL DIMENSIONS AS PROJECTED IN AMITAV GHOSH'S THE SHADOW LINES

**Dr. S. Chelliah**

*Professor, Head & Chairperson, School of English & Foreign Languages, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai.*

Indian novelists in English cover a wide range of themes social, historical, romantic, detective, rural, psychological and existential, cross-culture conflicts etc. Varied as the Indian novels in English are in theme, range, mood and tone, No doubt, Indian novelist in English represent " evolution of a distinct standard - a standard the body which is correct English usage, but whose soul is Indian in colour, imagery and now and then, even in the evolution of an idiom which is expressive of the unique quality of the Indian mind while conforming to the 'correctness' of the English usage" (Kumar 304). None can overlook the fact that the Indian novelists in English have enriched the English language considerably by annexing to it now form of expression, metaphrased idiom, and imagery and prose rhythm. It is generally held that Indian English novel is a major source for "a systematic study of culture contact and culture change, with Indian world view as the focus" (P305). New novels on new themes were written, technical and linguistic innovations made at full length. The 1980's saw the emergence of some great novelists - Allan Seal, upamanu Chatterjee, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Taroor, Rushdie, of whom Amitav Ghosh is considered as one of the most notable novelists holding a memorable place of repute and recognition in Indian English Fiction.

Born in Calcutta in 1956, Amitav Ghosh spent the major portion of his childhood in Bangladesh, Srilanka, Iran and India. Graduated from St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi, he worked with the Indian Express for a short period during the Emergency. Later he joined Delhi School of Economics as a lecturer in the Department of Anthropology. Leading a sort of nomadic life, he visited various places in the world and studied as a Compulsive traveler life, art culture of the places thus visited. He was well-versed in languages like English, Bengali, Hindi, French and even Arabic. Being employed as a Visiting Fellow in Center for Social Science, Trivandrum, Kerala between 1982 and 1983 and a research Associate in the Department of Sociology at Delhi University during the period 1983-87, he served as a lecture in Sociology in Delhi University in the year 1987 and as a Visiting Professor at University of Virginia, Charlottersville in 1988. Besides, he had a privilege of being a Visiting Professor at South Asia Center, Columbia University in 1989 during Spring Semester and university of Pennsylvania, Department of Anthropology during Fall Semester in 1989. He also served as a distinguished Visiting Professor at American University during 1997-1997 and joined as Professor in the Department of Comparative Literature at Queen's College, City University of New York in 1999.

Amitav Ghosh has established himself as a modern notable novelist of Indian fiction winning name and fame from all literary circles through publication of novels and non - fictional writings. He has to his credit publication of *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *In An Antique Land* (1992), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), *The Glass Palace* (2000) as novels and *Dancing in Cambodia* and *At Large in Burma* (1998) and *The Imam and the Indian : Prose Pieces* (2002) as collection of Prose pieces and Essays.

Amitav Ghosh, with a novelist's grasp of the personal lives of individuals is found beautifully writing a human account of various human predicaments coupled with existential problems and dimensions in life with an equal focus on migration and diasporic experience. No doubt, he is an adept at setting his action, situations and characters in the existential frame. He is a skillful artist delineating problems arising out of alienation, and arising from quest for identity and fulfillment of life's purpose. Stating from the concrete and finite angle of individual existence, his approach investigates the existential value of moods, beliefs and states of consciousness.

Emerging as an important concern in this era of technological explosion, Existentialism lays stress on individual existence, freedom and choice. It is nothing but a revolt against tradition, conventions, sensory empiricism, objectivity, behaviorism, logic and science." Existentialism has been a reaction in favour of individualism, subjectivity, introspection and feeling. It is a philosophy not of things but of human situation" (Fuller 603). It is a philosophy of existences, restricted to human existence. As Sartre says, " Existentialism's first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him" (P285). Existentialism claims that existence is always particular and individual and 'existence' is the investigation of the meaning of 'Being', which means that which is existible anything that is not nothing. Hence, existentialism is something constantly directed upon the individual problems attempting to answer the question related to the human existence. And all existentialists have show great concern for the human conditions and for man's quest to lead an authentic existence. They describe human existence in concreted situations and in terms of several dimensions.

All existentialists lay great stress upon man's innate freedom which holds man responsible for all his action for the



development of his personality. Man is free because he cannot be otherwise. He cannot escape his freedom, which becomes for him a dreadful responsibility. Amitav Ghosh's **The Shadow Lines** which won Sahitya Akademic Award for him is a blend of existential themes through a vision of buldungsroman. Individual memory and shared history are the two elements that give Ghosh's best work its distinction.

The Shadow Lines is out and out a memory novel. It is nothing but a representation of the existential themes through a sinuous course of recollection of memories. This novel is a pageantry of existential characters and a literary medley of existential themes with a disorderly composition and it is a tortuous account of the inner struggle of an individual who is caught between belief and unbelief. Ghosh vividly examines the existential predicament, by underscoring the importance of the problems of individual selfhood, authenticity, absurdity, temporality, death, desire, guilt, despair, anxiety and hope. He emphasizes on man's disillusionment and the futility of morbid search for belongingness. His solicitous concern is human relationship in a pandemonium of existences. Almost all characters in The Shadow Lines suffer from lack of proper understanding of their relationship. They are all in search of a meaningful existence and human identity. Sushila Singh has pointed out in her essay "Double Self in Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines", as

"Amitav Ghosh creates form the world with in the world without. His narrator hero goes to the self turns inwards in search of meaning out of the irrationality and absurdity of the prevailing human condition. He question the very idea of political freedom in the modern world and the force of nationalism which draws innumerable shadowlines between people and places and becomes the sources of terrifying violence annihilating the self" (P135).

The concept of freedom and its attributers in a contemporary human existence is the central, all pervading theme of **The Shadow Lines**. The longing for freedom from political, Social and cultural captivity, in its diverse contexts gets projected in this novel. It questions the meaning of absolute freedom and explores the values that emerge in the context of an individual response to the freedom. As freedom is fundamental in existential philosophy, this novel does prove an excellent basis for an existentiastic reading. It does explore the core of man's existence and the relevance of his being, moving between two contrasting cultures across four generations.

Amitav Ghosh brings out the tragedy of a lost dream, an illusion of political freedom through the character of a grandmother. She is a lady with her own concept of life. She became widow of an early age of thirty - two, had to work hard for her livelihood, had to struggle all her life to find ground under her feet. Her hard work paid dividends to her and got a comfortable living and a family with its life-style. She started her career as a school - teacher, and rose to be the principal of the school by climbing the ladder of seniority. In the fierceness of her pride, she is determined to lead a self-reliant life and refuses to accept any help from her relatives. " The price she had paid for that pride was that it had come to be transformed in her imagination into a barrage of slights and snubs; an imaginary barrier that she believed her gloating relatives had erected to compound her humiliation "(P 129)

Coming to the grips with the intricacies of her own existence, she strives hard enough to be successful in the modern existence. Being uprooted by the partition of Bengal, Thamma leads an immigrant life and feels alienated in her own country, making frantic efforts to seek, organize and assert identity. The grandmother's unbelonging is a product of circumstances created by the partition of nation with cartographic lines. This has made her a foreigner in her own home town, Dhaka, when she visits it again, to bring her senile uncle. When she arrives at Dhaka, she asks, "Where's Dhaka? I can't see Dhaka? (P 193), since she is in illusion with the city that has surrounded their old house. The Irony of her alienation and estrangement in her own hometown brought through Tridib's teasing, " but you are a foreigner now, you're as foreigner here as May" (P 195). Her strong affinities and relationship to the city of her birth, surface during this return and the novelist investigates the existential dilemma of belonging and non- belonging. Being a non-sentimental and non-yielding middle class school mistress, Thamma values the success in modern life as vital one. She is " extremely wary of her relatives; to her they represented an imprisoning wall of suspicion and obligations" (P 129). But suddenly she decides to bring her nonagenarian uncle to India, seventeen years after the Partition. This spurious resurgence of consanguineous feeling proves highly disastrous and her existential choice result in a perpetual tragedy.



The existential themes like choice, subjectivity, individualism, personal freedom and social criticism are projected neatly through the character of Ila. She is, no doubt, a perfect existential character who revolts against traditional and cultural barriers. Longing for a sense of security, stability and belongingness in London, she loses contact with her tradition and faith in cultural norms. In contemptuous scorn for her cultural, when Robi refuses to permit her to dance in a night club, she retorts,'

Do you see now why I've chosen to live in London?  
Do you see? It is only because i want to be free  
Free of what? I said  
Free of you! She shouted back.  
Free of your bloody culture free of all of you (PP 88-89).

A matrix of existential failures in an alien setting is portrayed by Amitav Gosh through the character of Ila. She lives in a world of fantasies and incongruities, unable to go beyond the surface to understand the meaning of existence. She values social and personal freedom as basis for existence and her choice to live in London brings her dread and forlornness. Ila lives so intensely in the present that calls herself a practical person without imaginations and inventions. Her passion for Western culture and for an authentic existence in a non-accepted land culminates in double alienation from self and from society. The citizens of developing nations always have a mythical fascination for living in the western world because of their wealth, technology luxury, non - conservative norms, non-interfering attitudes and healthier environment. Naturally, the immigrants from Third World Countries try to assimilate themselves into their socio-cultural scenario. Hence these immigrants deliberately alienate themselves from their original identity and culture. On the other side, non-acceptance by the native people and racism place them in a pathetic condition. Ila undergoes these ordeals of immigrant society with an existential crisis.

Assuming a belongingness, Ila tries to assert her dignity and pride for a peaceful survival in an alien setting. she imagines herself as a beautiful Western girl and deceives the narrator with a story of a doll, Magda. She considers Nick Price as her protector but as a victim of racism, she has to face the emotional trauma for being rejected by him and others and subjected to physical torment:

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 - and as for alone---  
her relatives., her friends, all waiting to walk  
with Ila" (P76).

Ignoring this kind of safe existence, she decides to live in London by her own choice and will. She surrenders to the Western Culture and imitates their style of living. She has to live on her pocket money and spends her spare time going on demonstrations and acting in radical plays for Indian immigrants in East London. Her subjective existential tone is reflected in her words," I'll do what i bloody well want, when i want and where" (P88). She is immensely self- absorbed in her illusionary existence and she takes pride in living with modern European society. In her overweening confidence, she distances herself from her homeland and treats the events of backward world as local things and non - historical. This contempt for her own nation out of illusion and absurdity and the progressive disorientation of self make her an existential character. Ila loses herself to her illusions and existential commitments. Her choice and freedom are responsible for her pain and sorrows. The onus of choice leads to existential conflicts in understanding the selfhood. Finally, Ila prepares to accept Nick's disloyalties and betrayals, with "helpless dependence coupled with despairing little acts of rebellion" (P 189).

The character of May Price is exactly contrary to that of Ila. Ila who has no regard for Third World countries, is highly self-centered. She is an Indian by tradition and a European by choice. But May price, though born and brought up in London, has passion for the people suffering around the world and works for amnesties. She chooses to lead a typical Indian widowhood in a Western State. She suffers from existential guilt and forlornness because of her inappropriate choice. Though the character of Tridib, a pseudo protagonist, Amitav Ghosh views inevitable existential theme, death. Death is considered as an end for all existential illusions and sufferings and "there is no life without life" (Encyclopedia of Religion Vol-4, P 251). Tridib's ideal freedom is without any boundaries and shadow lines and requires no war or bloodshed. He believes in relationships and for him, life is at midst of harmonious human relationships. Only such relationship can ensure real freedom in all spheres political, social, cultural and intellectual. The effort to give a logical, rational expression to the complex idea of freedom results in his death. His death marks the end of his concept of freedom. But grasping the meaning of his death is a



voyage towards an authentic existence. AS Anjali Karpe says,  
" Tridib's sacrifice remains a mystery. The act itself indicates that a single individual can never hope to quell a violent mob or restrain forces of communal strife. Individual valour is insufficient to change the tide of events and a single handed effort is doomed to die out, before achieving anything " (P 316).

Robi is another character, who is haunted by Tridib's death, becomes a civil servant taking charge of district administration through whom the ill- effects of political freedom are projected. He is one who criticises the killings in Assam, Punjab, Srilanka, Tripura and other places in the name of freedom. His idea is that a country can be divided with thousands of shadows lines politically but the memory of the people cannot be divided. He himself says: "If freedom were possible surely Tridib's death would have set me free "(P 247). Robi stands for existential fear and anguish. The narrator , who lives in the shadow of all these characters, projects almost all the major themes of existentialism by perceiving the naked reality of existence and meaningful nuances of existential self. As Anjali karpe rightly says,

" The novel provides an estimation of freedom not only as embodied in institutions - political or social- but also as the moral and spiritual power inherent in man. The characters demonstrate the importance of personal responsibility, which the freedom and dignity of choice place upon them in all decisions" (P 318).

Thus, Amitav Ghosh brings home the point that existentialism is not dark, it is not depressing as existentialism is about life and existentialists believe in living and fighting for life and **The Shadow Lines** presents an interplay of reality and illusion and coalescence of time and space to present the truth that human society cannot be divided by shadow lines of nations, colour or even races. Indians and Britishers , Hindu and Muslims and Christians are shown to have the same basic emotions and instincts. The writer has erased the shadow lines between the lowly rickshaw-puller and high-class. Academician, Tridib.

#### Works Cited

1. Fuller, B.A.G a History of Philosophy, New Delhi: Oxford Publishing Company, 1969.
2. Dhawan, R.K the Novels of Amitav Ghosh, New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1999.
3. Bheft, Indira and Indira Nithyanandam. Interpretations of Amitav Ghosh's, the Shadows Lines New Delhi: Creative Books, 2000.
4. Kapadia, Novy (Ed) Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines, New Delhi: Asia Book Club, 2001.
5. Roy, Anjali. "Microstoria: Indian Nationalism", "Little Stories" in Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines The Journal of Common Wealth Literature, Vol-35, No -2, 2000.
6. Sartre, Jean Paul. Being and Nothingness, London: Methuen and Co Ltd, 1969.