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Negotiating Identities: Diaspora and Multiculturalism in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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ABSTRACT:

Diaspora denotes the dispersion or scattering of individuals from their native geographical homeland or region to another land or area. It is frequently employed to characterize communities or groups of individuals who have been compelled to abandon their ancestral territories and resettle in different parts of the world. Diaspora encapsulates feelings of displacement, nostalgia, and alienation. In postcolonial literature, the notion of diaspora is crucial for examining themes such as identity, displacement, hybridity, and cultural resilience. Multiculturalism signifies a society where multiple cultures coexist. It encompasses a blend of diverse cultures stemming from various ethnicities, races, religions, and so forth. It encourages all ethnic groups to adapt collectively, regardless of their cultural disparities. The connection between the two concepts is evident in the way diasporic movements significantly contribute to the establishment of multicultural societies. This paper explores the integration of various cultures, ethnicities, and generations working together to forge a unique culture of their own. Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* serves as an illustrative example, aiming to portray the challenges faced by diasporic individuals in their quest to establish and preserve a solid identity. This research paper endeavors to analyze the identity crisis experienced by diasporic characters and their pursuit of identity within the narrative of *The Shadow Lines*.

Key words: Diaspora, Identity, Displacement, Memory, Multicultural, Culture, Ethnicity, Postcolonial, Cosmopolitan.

Introduction:

The notion of identity within diaspora literature encompasses a wide array of cognitive elements, including rootlessness, isolation, alienation, nostalgia, generational void, and a journey of identity. Diaspora authors strive to forge a connection between the homeland and immigrants by anticipating the existing cultural conflicts between these areas. For newly arrived refugees, the aspiration to develop and solidify a new identity is essential for achieving equilibrium between their past and present. Benedict Anderson, in his work *Imagined Communities*, articulates:

...it is an imagined political community.... It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. This makes it possible for emotional affinities to transcend some disruptive dissonances, thereby making space for a sense of nationness and nationalism. (6).

Multiculturalism can be characterized as a non-political mindset that embraces and values cultural and ethnic differences without engaging in mutual questioning, thereby fostering a diverse environment. This concept of multiculturalism contributes to the formation of a society, state, nation, country, or region comprised of individuals from various cultural backgrounds. Bhikhu Parekh beautifully defines that, "It is neither a political doctrine nor a philosophical issue but actually a perspective on a way of viewing human life. Increasing cultural diversity focuses on the promotion of rights for different religion and cultural groups. The rights for cultural groups form basis for multiculturalism" (Parekh 59).

Discussion:

The term 'Diaspora' emerged in 1990, yet it is as old as the theory of postcolonialism itself. Different ethnic groups within postcolonial literature exhibit unique ethnic, cultural, and historical characteristics that are deeply embedded in their original cultural heritages; consequently, the suffering of those who are displaced and deprived is especially poignant and intricate, stemming from their struggle to find a 'home' of their own. In his analytical work, Murali Prasad aptly articulates that, "Ghosh visualizes to the recuperative exercise of transitional imagination to overcome communication strain. Ghosh as a postcolonial author cleverly exploits the postcolonial narrator's actions and behaviour in this novel" (Prasad 79). In a postcolonial framework, diaspora denotes the dislocation of a community or individual from their native land due to historical events such as colonization, enslavement, or economic migration. *The Shadow Lines* reveals the fusion of diverse cultures. This novel illustrates the convergence of the West and the East, while the continuity of familial connections persists. Within this narrative, we encounter a highly modern perspective intertwined with Indian customs, showcasing Bengali culture in three distinct settings: one in Dhaka, another in Calcutta, and the last abroad. According to Brinda Bose:

In Ghosh's fiction, the diasporic entity continuously negotiates between two lands, separated by time and space - history and geography and attempts to redefine the present through a nuanced understanding of the past. As the narrator in *The Shadow Lines* embarks upon a journey of discovery of roots and reasons, the more of the one he unearths leaves him with less of the other. (Bose 19)

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* illustrates the possibilities for creating a multicultural society. It demonstrates how the experience of diasporic displacement acts as a catalyst for enlightenment on the path to a cosmopolitan culture. The unnamed narrator expresses various interpretations of cultural identity through the main characters in the story - his grandmother, Tha'mma, his cousin, Ila, and his uncles, Tridib and Robi. Growing up in a bourgeois household in Calcutta, the narrator embodies the acceptance of a metropolitan and bilingual culture. His interactions with his cousin and uncles, who reside abroad, along with his time spent in London for research, have influenced his perspective and approach to issues of nation and culture, making him more cosmopolitan. A significant influence during his formative years is his grandmother, a fiercely independent modern woman. Tha'mma symbolizes the essence of cultural identity. Despite her relocated identity, she has successfully adapted to contemporary culture. In a way, she experiences confusion regarding her identity, as her original identity contrasts with her present one. Ghosh delves into the transformations and struggles of the two central characters, Tha'mma and Ila, emphasizing how they are impacted by their diasporic circumstances. Homi Bhabha observes that colonialism presents a threat to "the unhomeliness that is the condition of extra territorial and cross-cultural initiation..." (*Location of Culture* 940).

The narrator's grandmother, Tha'mma, was born in the Indian subcontinent, specifically in Dhaka, prior to the partition. She lost her home when she and her husband relocated to Myanmar for work. During her childhood, she lived in a joint family environment, where everyone shared their living space and meals. As articulated by Jethamoshai, "Once you start moving you never stop." (*The Shadow Lines* 215), this phenomenon manifests clearly in her experience. After the death of her husband, she rushed back to the un-partitioned Calcutta. However, her concept of home becomes increasingly complex after the partition of India. Her birthplace, Dhaka, evolves into an alien land for her, requiring a passport for her return. Tridib's remark regarding her at the Dhaka airport is particularly noteworthy; he observes, "But you are a foreigner now, you are as foreign here as May, much more than May, for look at her, she does not even need a visa to come here" (*The Shadow Lines* 195).

From an early age, Tridib developed insight into a multicultural environment. The recognition of varying relationships within his family is deeply embedded in his awareness. He maintains a connection to the West through his grandfather, as Ghosh observes: "Tridib had been to London, with his parents, many years ago, when he was a boy...there was a family called Price, who lived in West Hampstead, but they weren't relatives - they were very, very old friends of Tridib's family, because Mrs. Price's father, Lionel Tresawsen had lived in India when the British were here, and he and Tridib's grandfather, who was a very important man, a judge in the Calcutta High Court, had been friends" (*The Shadow Lines* 12).

The displacement and dislocation that the diaspora undergoes liberates Ila from any rigid conception of home. Ila does not mourn the absence of a home concept, nor does she pursue an alternative in her life. She fully embraces her diasporic identity, displaying indifference towards her lack of roots. While interacting with the narrator, she confidently states, "we can choose to build a house wherever we like" (*The Shadow Lines* 70). Both Tha'mma and Ila are deeply concerned with the idea of freedom. However, for Tha'mma, freedom represents the emancipation of her nation from British colonial domination, which resulted in the emergence of secretive terrorist organizations like Anushilan and Jugantor, aimed at assassinating British officials and law enforcement agents. Conversely, Ila's understanding of freedom is fundamentally different. Her reaction to Roby's criticism regarding her dancing at the Grand Hotel is particularly revealing. In a moment of anger, she retorts, "Do you see now why I've chosen to live in London? Do you see? It's only because I want to be free" (*The Shadow Lines* 88). By 'free,' she refers to liberation from Indian culture and its conservative aspects that continually impose limitations on women. Although Tha'mma and Ila have contrasting interpretations of freedom, these ideas are influenced by their individual environments and the temporal contexts they navigate or opt to overlook. Bill Ashcroft et al. in *The Empire Writes Back* also express this notion, asserting that "Diaspora does not simply refer to geographical dispersal but also to the vexed questions of identity, memory and home which such displacement produces." (217-218).

The novel *The Shadow Lines* illustrates Ghosh's diasporic imagination through its character portrayals. The elderly figures, including the grandmother, her sister Mayadevi, and their aged uncle Jethamoshai, embody the experience of diaspora. They struggle to come to terms with the harsh reality of partition. For them, geographical boundaries are merely shadow lines. When partition occurred in 1947, the elderly Jethamoshai adamantly refused to abandon his ancestral home in Dhaka. His profound connection to his roots in Dhaka renders him impervious to the threats posed by communal riots. His present holds paramount importance for him. Jethamoshai evokes the character of Bishan Singh, a mentally unstable Sikh in Saadat Hasan Manto's narrative *Toba Tek Singh*, who also declines to relocate to India and persistently inquires about the whereabouts of Toba Tek Singh. Ultimately, he perishes at the Wagah border, in no man's land, symbolizing his rejection of both India and Pakistan as his homeland. Consequently, diasporic consciousness is evident in *The Shadow Lines* through the experiences of its elderly characters. Amitav Ghosh's characters envision a boundaryless world where all individuals can coexist peacefully and harmoniously. Tridib perceives the world as a space that embraces all cultures, races, and genders without prejudice. Ghosh grants his characters the liberty to traverse the globe freely:

Tridib's father was a diplomat, an officer in the Foreign Service. He and Mayadevi were always away, abroad or in Delhi; after interval of two or three years they would sometimes spend a couple of months in Calcutta, but that was all. Of Tridib's two brothers, Jatin-kaku, the elder who was two years elder than Tridib, was an economist with the U.N. He was always too somewhere in Africa or South-East Asia, with his wife and his daughter Ila, who was my age (*The Shadow Lines* 6).

The diaspora context plays a crucial role in shaping the novel. The author depicts the traumatic journeys of characters situated both in Bengal and abroad. Furthermore, the story addresses the concepts of multiculturalism. It also signifies a transition towards new ideals and an aspiration to overcome geographical limitations. Ghosh's artistic perspective is fundamentally diasporic and postcolonial. *The Shadow Lines* further challenges the pursuit of

self-identity in the contemporary world. This narrative investigates the compensations and avenues of escape that the current state of the world provides to a select, privileged group of sensitive and talented individuals. As a result, the novel has positioned Amitav Ghosh as one of the leading modern Indian novelists.

Conclusion:

Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* demonstrates that diasporic displacement acts as a catalyst for enlightenment in the pursuit of a multiracial culture. The narrative underscores the multifaceted characteristics of diaspora and dislocation, leading to intricate outcomes. At the heart of the novel are the characters and storyline, which engage with the themes of diaspora and its effects. It particularly explores how the characters Tha'mma and Ila are misled and influenced by the forces of diaspora and displacement. Additionally, Ghosh investigates the complexities of modern existence, which includes migration and cross-cultural interactions. *The Shadow Lines* seeks to unveil a multitude of cultures or cultural amalgamation, presenting an impartial reflection on a homogeneous society. Ghosh promotes the nurturing of a cosmopolitan culture within the community. Through the perspective of familial generations, Amitav Ghosh illustrates a multicultural society. *The Shadow Lines* features diverse portrayals of individuals from various cultures and ethnic backgrounds, thereby crafting their own distinctive space.

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