
The Study of Memories as a Narrative Mode in Amitav Ghosh's novel The Shadow Lines

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Abstract: Memories play a vital role in the formation of one's identity and their perception of the world. It is important to understand how the imagination and the reality of memories, help as well as ruins a person. It is closely related to history and without this, there can be no past. According to Daniel M. Bernstein, "The history that depends upon the memory is no better than the memory upon which it is based" (Bernstein). Therefore, we must make memories into consideration in building a person's character as it is one of the most important factors in a human's life. Memories have acted as a narrative mode for the people around the world. It is used to tell a story, remember and represent the past or it can be used to reinvent any particular event after visiting it many times. This research paper is focused on "*The study of memories as a narrative mode in Amitav Ghosh's novel The Shadow Lines*" Memory is a term that describes ability or a storehouse to recollect whenever needed. This paper will talk about how Amitav Ghosh employs memory as a narrative technique to reveal the importance of memories in the narrator's life and how through the characters and situations it is used as a map, an illusion, remembrance, metaphors, etc. This paper will be taking the theory of diaspora given by Robin Cohen into consideration to put forth the argument.

Introduction: Memories help us to experience our psychological continuity through time which builds a person's identity. It invades all the aspects of a person's cognitive and moral life. Memories not only help us to recall the events from our past but also reconstruct it through time. The reconstruction is mostly influenced by the emotional factors found in the character like going back in time, talking about their homeland. Robin Cohen defines diaspora as communities living together in one country often remembering their old homeland as Tha'mma does in Amitav Ghosh's novel. It captures the invariable of the characters' experiences: exiled and homeland. It's an attempt to negotiate between the two polarities i.e. Bangladesh and India as well as India and Britain. These are tampered by visiting that particular memory again and again unless the real one fades away. Using memory to tell a story is not new. It has always been in use from time immemorial and writers have been using memory as a narrative technique to recollect their character's past and shape it accordingly in front of the readers. Memories have been mostly connected with the

character's childhood and it is one of the most important elements of an autobiographical novel. VS Naipaul, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Haruki Murakami are the few contemporary writers who have implied the narrative technique of memory in their novels. The narrator becomes selective in revealing the whole story while using memories as a narrative technique. Charles Dickens in his novel *David Copperfield* uses memory as a narrative technique. The narrator in the novel recalls the events of his childhood and discusses everything from his perspective at that particular point of time. He uses *Copperfield* to reevaluate the reality of his memories in front of the readers.

Memories as a Narrative Mode: Amitav Ghosh as a diasporic writer develops his characters from different places. They often acknowledge the notion of their old country, religion, custom, and folklore. He remains faithful to the historical events in his stories whether it's the fall of the Konbaung Dynasty in *The Glass Palace* or the war of opium trade in *Sea of Poppies*. His use of language and distinct narrative makes him one of the most important literary figures of his time.

The Shadow Lines published in 1988 follows the lives of two families intertwined with each other. The novel is significant in its theme of imaginary borders and the powerful use of language. The use of memory, however, ends up being the most prominent theme as well as the narrative mode for the narrator to move forward in the story. The famous uncle, Tridib who is a student of archeology stimulates his ability to imagine places he has never been or experienced. Tridib has given the narrator the "eyes to see the world" (Ghosh) who can also be called his alter ego. The narrator's memories aren't reliable most of the time as he himself is unsure of the events. At the very beginning of the novel, he is confused about the time when he started telling the time or when he learned to tie his shoelaces. We see him diving into his past and recollecting his memories to present it as a true story. Some of the time he invents his own story to believe in them. When he couldn't get the picture inside his mind he decides that Tridib at the age of eight looked like him and after some time he settles at that. He goes on reinventing the memories into different stories and believes them to be real after a certain point of time. This raises questions of the nature of the reality of the stories being told whether they happened or they are just the invention of his imagination. He doesn't remember very well if they had visited Gole Park or not but remembers that they went home after finding about the cotton man. This makes us believe that the Narrator doesn't remember everything or whatever he says is true. There are only significant things throughout the novel which is remembered by him, the remaining events are either his imagination or not true.

The narrator switches back in time disregarding the chronological event of nature through his concept of memories and the stories that are hidden behind them. Sometimes, his perception of the stories as a child isn't to be trusted as memories of the same event changes over time due to change in a person or in response to the listener. The depletion of memories may be replaced by other imaginable stances within the context of reality. The narrator is a child was very naïve and could be persuaded to believe something. He was more fascinated by other's stories and could believe anything, like, when Jatin jokingly says that Ila is not

coming to see them, the narrator easily believes him and becomes upset. This shows how he is emotional regarding the stories that he is told. He recalls them later in his life to see the importance of it at that time. He comes out as a person with fragmented memories, revealing only what he thinks to be right or true. Memories of people can never be trusted fully as they cannot be proved right or wrong unless we match it with the other person who has experienced the same event. Salman Rushdie about his narrator of *Midnight's Children* in his essays *Imaginary Homeland* writes,

My narrator, Saleem, suspect in his narration; his mistakes are the mistakes of a fallible memory compounded by quirks of the character and circumstance, and his vision is fragmentary. It may be that when the Indian writer who writes from India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost (Rushdie).

This shows that people normally remember the fragmented version of their memories and hence the narrators are not fully reliable when they are revealing their past. The narrator in *The Shadow Lines* relies heavily on his past and conception of anything he tells to the readers. We can only rely on it after reevaluation of that event with the other character's memories in the novel.

The memories act as a map for the character showing where in the world those places are in their stories. They remember the places as if they have been living there forever. Tha'mma, Tridib, and the narrator recall these throughout the story. When the narrator first visits the streets of London, he remembers the map as described by Tridib when he was a child. When he visits London in reality after many years, he recalls the lanes of London like the West End Lane and the places where bombs exploded during World War II very easily as if he was living there since his birth. He remembers each side of Ila's room while meeting her in the city. He has already seen them through the eyes of hers long ago. He travels through memories to reach the place where he wants to go by visualizing the places in his mind and events from the past which he has never truly experienced. He reaches Colombo in his imagination and admires the roof of Mayadebi's house after Tridib suggests him. He tries to fit inside Tridib's story about Alan Tresawson's life at Left Book Club. He mentally experiences the things which happened with Alan in the 1940s. For the narrator, it was as if both the events were taking place at the same time and he is present in both. He uses his powerful imagination and memories to make things present inside his mind. He starts seeing things clearly as if it were happening with him. He also slips in the era of World War II to find out Dan's room and his living style. We see the narrator fusing history with his memory to come up with the truth.

As Tridib's stories, the narrator also lives with the stories of other people. He reimagines them accordingly as he tries to piece his past conception of characters with the adult reality before him. He has the power to reimagine someone else's memories to see things the way other characters did in real life. He imagines Dhaka on the day his grandmother, Robi, Tridib and the others arrived there. He juxtaposes the concept of past

and present in his stream of consciousness narrative technique while using the memory of his own as well as the others. The narrator has a habit of linking his present with the earliest memories of him. He always tries to connect two dots and make meaning out of it; whether it's meeting May Price in London after seventeen years or going in the cellar with Ila thrice. He differentiates the events with his vivid details and compares them with each other. When he meets May Price after years, he observes how her hairstyle has changed from dark and glossy to grey. He even remembers the names of Ila's classmates from whatever she had told him in Calcutta.

The narrator remembers his childhood and his thoughts at a particular point of time. In the community where Tridib roams, people accept his life because it matches their observation and perception towards him. Memories have a different take on different instances and most of the time they matter more in front of the actual experiences as found in *The Shadow Lines*. The memory of the narrator proves that stories can be more important even if they might not entirely be true. Tridib doesn't care if people believe in his stories or not, he goes on telling people about himself and the stories surrounding him. When Tridib comes back after weeks, the listeners make fun of him and his story of meeting a foreign girl named May Price. The narrator's outbursts suggest that Tridib loves telling the stories to people without really caring about the reality as well as the reaction of the people towards his world of imagination. The reason for Tridib's detailed imagination is his belief of everyone living in a story. According to him, it is upon people to choose a story and make it more beautiful by living inside them. The imagination of making stories is at what Tridib excels most. His stories slowly become a memory and then it is hard for everyone to differentiate between reality and imagination. At that point, the person feels as if he had always lived that particular event in his life.

Memories of the same event may vary from person to person in real. Hence, through the reading of the text, it can be projected that the narrative statement of both the parties can be different from each other but they can both be true at the same time. When Ila and the narrator remember Tridib's statement, it suggests that they both have different recollection which requires them to reevaluate what might be true. The same happens with the photograph of May Price when the narrator discovers the truth of when it was taken. When he sees the photograph of hers in London, he assumes that it must be taken in Calcutta when she went there. But it turns out that it was taken much before. She sent that photograph to Tridib along with the letter when they were trying to know each other. This helps him to reevaluate the truth of his conceptualized memory of that particular event in his life. It reflects how memories can manipulate a person's identity in making them believe something which is not true.

In *The Shadow Lines*, the photographs are used to know the reality of memories behind them. The narrator whenever sees a photograph, he imagines them as if he is seeing them with his own eyes. The past becomes the present in front of him. The photograph he sees of Alan Tresawsen in London traces him back to the World War and his life in that

chaos. One photograph reminds him of the moment before Mayadebi and Alan talked to each other for the very first time. He not only sees those past but lives in them. After analyzing the photographs and imagining them, these moments become his memories with which he lives for the rest of his life.

Memory is a prison in *The Shadow Lines* for the characters especially the narrator. For Ila, living in Calcutta is the same as living in a caged society. She can never be bound to anything or anyone. The reason for her choosing to live in London is an escape from the dominant patriarchal society. Robi slaps her when she tries to dance in the bar. Similarly, Tha'mma is trapped between the memories of Dhaka – her homeland and the reality in which she is living at the present. She constantly tries to break away from the present and relive in the past whereas the narrator greatly enjoys the fact that Ila can never be free of him as she lives inside him. He tells Ila that she is as much within him as he is within her. Therefore, she can never be free of him, his culture and society. She has been captured inside his memory forever. The romance of Tridib and May is ingrained in his mind out of jealousy. The narrator forgets most of the things of their day out with May except the moment when Tridib asks him to go out of the car and eat something. It was a secret between them that he had never understand. He was utterly disappointed after being replaced by May in the eyes of Tridib. The story comes to a circle when May and the narrator make love to each other after knowing the truth of Tridib's death.

The memories of the characters in the novel have a different aspect of the narrative technique. Ila is the kind of person who lives in the present rather than living in her imagination. Her memories are weak unlike Tridib and the narrator. She doesn't possess the power to roam around the world in her imagination. She has the freedom to experience things on her own as her reality for her is more important than the stories of Tridib. When the narrator tries to talk about the stories told by Tridib, Ila faintly remembers them. She, at a point, is puzzled by the narrator's insistence on reviving old memories as she doesn't remember her childhood very clearly. The narrator asks Ila if she remembers how Robi and they both used to listen to the stories of Tridib on which she hesitantly answers. The narrator understands that she doesn't remember them. Ila uses her doll, Magda to reveal her own story which makes her easy to deal with the hardships. She physically traveled the world as a child and is familiar with it whereas the narrator, who has never traveled, is similarly familiar with the world. He travels in his imagination and the memories he acquired with the stories of Tridib. The narrator's uncle's imagination is much better than anyone else in the novel. His memories are full of details that are described accordingly in his mind. The reason for the narrator's strong memory is the powerful imagination of his beloved uncle, Tridib. It was him who showed the narrator the world of imagination and introduced him to the jar full of stories. The narrator doesn't need to travel the world physically to know about it. Similarly, Tha'amma, the grandmother never had an actual experience of Jethamoshai's side of the house which remained a fantastical story of Upside-Down House throughout her life. The reality of this house was only discovered when she went to Dhaka and saw them with her

own eyes. The division between the houses is the lines drawn on the diasporic members around the world who belong to two different places.

Memory acts as an illusion in the novel for the characters. They cannot differentiate between reality and illusion. Sometimes the images in Tridib's mind are not clear and he has very decisive knowledge. He tries to ignore the reality for the sake of not hampering his memories. For him, the house was a pure and bright world of belief but in reality, it was full of tawdry jealousies. When he finds his perspective different from the reality of that event, he becomes upset. The illusional memories are hard for the characters to digest. For Tha'mma the house in Dhaka where she was born and spent her childhood is the real-life aligning with reality whereas the present life of hers in Calcutta is just an illusion. The Dhaka in her memory was different than the modern one. She sees the city, feels the surroundings but only in disbelief. The reality in her mind differs from the real truth which is disturbing for her as well as her memories.

We cannot deny the fact that the narrator considers his imaginary reconstruction as more real rather than of his experience. He is obsessed with his childhood memories and the internal building of imagination that he constructs. According to him, the place need not be a real one to exist as he can go anywhere in the world that he wants. The narrator lived for the memories as he has experienced them in reality. His whole life revolves around the web of memories with their images inside his mind. It was Tridib who introduced him to the world of imagination where borders and boundaries mean nothing. Despite the age difference between them, their relationship was built on stories and memories which becomes the only way the narrator learns about the world.

His atlas showed me, for example, that within the tidy ordering of Euclidean space, Chiang Mai in Thailand was much nearer Calcutta than Delhi is; that Chengdu in China is nearer than Srinagar is. Yet I never heard of those places until I drew my circle, and I cannot remember a time when I was so young that I had not heard of Delhi or Srinagar.

For him, the whole world existed in his mind where he not only travels with them but also reconstructs his ideas using his imagination. He shapes the world how he views it accordingly. The narrator also uses Ila's story to reconstruct his ideas as he uses Tridib's stories in front of others. Using Ila's ideas, he recalls the house of Mrs. Price and beautifully describes how to get to the kitchen and the cellar from the bedroom of Nick Price in London. Tha'mma who remembers her childhood has thousands of memories. She has a history that reflects how she thinks of the present.

But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean where's the difference then? And if there's no difference both sides will be the same, it'll be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch train in Dhaka and get off in

Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all for then-partition and all the killing and everything- if there isn't something in between? (Ghosh).

People can never part themselves from the experience of memories. It can be seen in Tha'mma's expression on the boundaries which not only reveals her identity but also her search for the perfect past constructed in her memories. She wants to relive those moments again and again. Tha'mma as individual struggles to digest the fact of recalling her memories with borders and at the same time Tridib experiences the world though there are no boundaries between his memories. She couldn't stand the difference that was going to happen to her homeland. She doesn't want reality to change. "For the first time, my grandmother seemed excited" (Ghosh) when she listened about her Dhaka journey to meet her uncle, Jethamoshai. Tha'mma was excited as for her she would be going back to relive those moments again after years. The idea of the past is always related to reality and going back to ancestral place means going back in time. Robin Cohen in his paper Global Diaspora beautifully expresses that "members of a diaspora retained a collective memory of 'their original homeland'; they idealized their ancestral home, were committed to the restoration of the 'original homeland' and continued in various ways 'to relate to that homeland'" (Cohen). For Tha'mma Calcutta can never be her home no matter what and hence and she still identifies Dhaka as her reality of existence.

At the cellar scene when Ila wraps up herself with a towel, the narrator excitedly wishes for her acceptance which is an intrinsic part of his identity- of memories and conceptions about Ila that he made throughout his life. Ila going back to Nick, rejecting the narrator is an answer to how the narrator lived those years in his imagination of thinking about Ila the other way around.

Memories haunt people and the narrator is one of the main victims of it. For fifteen years he had little knowledge of things that happened in Dhaka but didn't know the reality and had no information regarding it. His memories were of the terror he felt while coming back home from school. He finally uses his memories to piece his full story together which happened in 1964. The death of Tridib in Dhaka and the riots that happened in other parts of the country were somewhat similar to each other. Amitav Ghosh uses the narrative technique of memory throughout the novel to move the story forward. It not only focuses on the characters' mental process but also their thoughts of reliving these memories. In spite of nonlinear narrative, it hooks us throughout the nexus of memories. It slowly merges into the story to become the prominent theme and also the apparent element to reveal the climax.

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