

The Postcolonial Metropolis: A Study of the Cityscape in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Amitav Ghosh is probably the most celebrated Indian writer of the day. Though dubbed, primarily, as a historical novelist, Ghosh seems to belie such categorizations because his artistic indulgences owe as much to history as to "travel, migration and lived experience of cosmopolitanism." (Desai 125) Many of his works imply an "imperial context" where characters travel across the national and cultural boundaries; unsettling and settling and inhabiting many places. However, his novel, *The Shadow Lines*, seems most notable for its unique projection of place, a key point in the post-colonial discourse. Here, the writer weaves his contemplation of place together with the concerns of identity, partition, migration, frontier and violence in an intricate narrative of the cities of Calcutta, London and Dhaka of the pre-independence and post-independence times. These cities are put parallel as "seat of cultures" and seem to evolve due to their "ambivalent and charismatic intersection with time" (*Location of Culture* 141). Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's concept of city, therefore, the paper attempts to illustrate the three metropolises as post-colonial cities.

Henri Lefebvre in his essay "The Specificity of the City" claims that city is related to society as it maintains a relation not only to its "constituting elements" but also to its history. (100) By constituting elements of society he implies countryside and agriculture, offensive and defensive force, political power, states etc. Underlining the fact that city "changes when society as a whole changes", Lefebvre specifies city as an interface between the "near order" and the "far order" where the *near order* means relations of individuals in groups of variable size, (more or less organized and structured) and relations of these groups among themselves. By the *far order* he refers to the large and powerful institutions that regulate society, by a legal code, culture by which the *far order* projects itself at a higher level and imposes itself. (Lefebvre 101)

In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh underlines the interface between the *near order* and the *far order* of the three cities; Calcutta, London and Dhaka and illustrates the link between the present and the past.

For this, the writer takes recourse to alternative narration; fictional rendition of personal reminiscences and history and disrupts the narrative assumptions of chronological view of history conforming to the features of post-colonial allegory. (Ashcroft 7) The representation of the cityscape in the novel is a result of "self-conscious experimentation and rewriting" (Mongia 228).

Calcutta

It is through the recollection of Tridib, his "rich relative" and uncle, that the narrator presents the first glimpse of the *near order* (relation between individuals and groups) of Calcutta. Tridib had stayed in London, Colombo and other far away places as a child and fascinates the narrator with interesting tales about those places. Something concerning Tridib troubles the narrator and other major characters in the novel. The mystery that Tridib was killed in communal riot in Dhaka unfolds through the

circuitous narration as the narrator travels in time and space; past and present, through memory and imagination.

In the Calcutta of 1960s, Tridib lives a simple and carefree life with his aging grandmother in an old house in Bellygunge Place. He frequents the street joint around Gole Park where the narrator lives. The narrator's grandmother (Tha'mma) believes Tridib to be a wastrel who spends all his time at those street corner *addas*:

But the truth was that Tridib came there rarely.... Nathu Chaubey, the paanwala who sat in the stall at the corner of our lane, or my friend Montu, who could see the far side of the lane from his bathroom window, or someone at the second-hand book stall, would tell me. They all knew I was related to Tridib. (*The Shadow Lines* 8)

The area in Calcutta of the time is thinly populated with "so few cars around" and "a few scattered sacks by the earliest refugees from the East".

Nonetheless, the grandmother exclaims to notice the rows of shacks on both sides of the road as they move past the campus of Jadavpur University to meet her relative from Dhaka: "When I last came here ten years ago, there were rice fields running alongside the road; it was the kind of place where rich Calcutta people built garden houses. And look at it now – as filthy as a babui's nest. It's all because of the refugees, flooding in like that." (145) When the narrator's father reminds her that they too were refugees, the grandmother dismisses him by saying that they came long before partition.

Migration of Hindus from East Pakistan, first due to partition and then as an aftermath of the 1964 riot, has been a political reality of the border between Bengal (India) and East Pakistan. This has completely changed the dynamics of the city. The narrator observes that by 1990's many old acquaintances left and the space was filled with crowd:

When I walk past the paan-shop now and look at the crowds thronging through those neon-lit streets, the air-conditioned shops filled with rickety stalls and the tarpaulin counters of pavement vendors, at the traffic packed as tight as a mail train all the way to the Dhakuria overbridge...

The narrator refers to the increasing concentration and mobility in Calcutta which contained "a talkative population of students, and would-be footballers and bank clerks and small-time politicians and all the rest who gravitated towards that conversation-loving stretch of road between Gariahat and Gole Park" (9)

The change in the demography of the city also implies change in value system. As a child, the narrator's household is dominated by his Tha'mma's values of importance of time and hard work: "In our flat all of us worked hard at whatever we did: my grandmother at her schoolmistressing; I at my homework; my mother at her housekeeping; my father at his job as a junior executive" (4) Nevertheless, when the narrator's father gets promotion and they shift to a bigger house the grandmother withdraws her "enveloping placental presence" to the four walls of her room." (133) allowing more space to her daughter in law.

The grandmother is disinterested in anything "current." She fiercely questions the narrator's fondness for Ila; Tridib's niece, narrator's childhood friend, and a modern

woman. She derides Ila's notion of freedom when she learns that Ila wants to be free of Indian "(bloody) culture". Ila, too, does not have a high opinion of the grandmother's passion for the struggle for freedom; she considers her a "war mongering fascist". However, the narrator defends his grandmother's wish for "...a middle-class life in which, like the middle classes the world over, she would thrive believing in the unity of nationhood and territory, of self-respect and national power; that was all she wanted – a modern middle class life, a small thing that history had denied her in its fullness ..." (86)

Ila and Tridib symbolise the "current" whereas the grandmother symbolises the past. The grandmother's reality consists of memory of pre-independence Dhaka while Tridib's reality consists of memory and imagination of far away places in the post-independence Calcutta. The narrator and the city of Calcutta accommodate both and mediate between the two.

Dhaka

For the grandmother the urban agglomeration of Calcutta does not hold any charm. She is increasingly reminded of her childhood and the house she had grown up in – in Dhaka:

...a very odd house.... evolved slowly, ... like a honeycomb, with every generation of Boses adding layers and extensions, until it was like a huge, lop-sided step-pyramid, inhabited by so many branches of the family that even the most knowledgeable amongst them had become a little confused about their relationships. (133)

The evolution of house implies evolution of a place with time. Dhaka as a city has also evolved since the grandmother first moved away from this place of her birth. Following her marriage she shifts to Mandalaya in Burma to live with her husband, a railway officer. Her own life undergoes a lot of ups and down; her husband dies of pneumonia, she takes up school teaching in Calcutta and settles there. During partition (1947), Dhaka becomes part of East Pakistan and another country.

However, years later, when the grandmother resolves to visit Dhaka with her sister, Mayadebi, to bring her elderly uncle "home" (151), she expects to find Dhaka of her childhood which "had long since vanished into the past." (213)

The year is 1964 when the riot against Bengali Hindus occurs in East Pakistan (Khulna) and spreads through Calcutta. Dhaka of the time seems grappling with fear and violence emanating from the awareness of national and religious identity.

The grandmother anticipates a tangible border between India and East Pakistan before her first visit to Dhaka by plane after partition. She learns from her son, however, that in the modern world the border is not on the frontier: "it's right inside the airport. You'll see. You'll cross it when you have to fill in all those disembarkation cards and things." This explanation, however, does not convince the grandmother:

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....What was it all for then – partition and all the killing and everything – if there isn't something in between? (167)

Here one gets a hint that places (frontiers / borders) are “invented” and therefore they are fluid. For the first time, the grandmother becomes aware of this fluidity; she realises that her identity is related to two places; (of birth) Dhaka and (nationality) India, this realisation disturbs her sense of order and sanctity.

On arriving in Dhaka the grandmother is baffled to see the modern buildings and constructions and keeps asking “Where is Dhaka? But when the car turns into a large, bustling square, ... she grips her sister Mayadebi’s arm and cries out: “look, Shador-baajar, there’s the Royal Stationery, do you remember?(227) She finds” ... suddenly the sights were falling into place like a stack of old photographs.”

Their ancestral home is not the same anymore; now it consists of the workshop of Saifuddin mechanic and houses a cycle rickshaw puller, Khalil, whose wife cooks for the grandmother’s elderly uncle. The grandmother is shocked to learn that her uncle voluntarily accommodated the two refugees in his house; she remembers a time when he was so orthodox that he wouldn’t let a Muslim’s shadow pass near him. The current Dhaka appears to be an “Uncanny” metropolis to the grandmother; at once familiar and strange, safe and threatening, “mine and “not mine.” (Nayar 89) Her discomfort proves right as they encounter a wrenching tragedy in which Tridib, Khalil, and the elderly uncle are brutally attacked and killed by a mob. The “religious and political ideologies of state projects itself into “practico-material reality” (Lefebvre 101) of Dhaka.

The city mirrors in the mobility, displacement, border-conflict and violence characteristic of the post-colonial world; the grandmother’s cousins leave Dhaka and settle in Calcutta; Saifuddin, settles in Dhaka as he escapes from his birthplace Motihari, in Bihar, which he says, is “a wonderful” but “troubled” place. All these characters undergo experience of loneliness and homesickness of settlers trying to assimilate into community. (Paraphrased, Lehan 190)

Robi, recollecting the horrific tragedy of his brother Tridib’s death, blames nations and states for glorifying border as a limiting zone with no concern to its people who bear the brunt: “... why don’t they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every place a new name? What would it change? It’s a mirage...” (*The Shadow Lines* 272)

Ironically, the borders fail to separate, that is why a riot that originates in Dhaka reaches Calcutta. Dhaka as a metropolis exemplifies the fact that lines based on religion, culture, space can at best plague humanity with the worse kind of fear; the “fear of the war between oneself and one’s image in the mirror.” (225). With this overpowering fear the cities turn themselves inside out and against their own inhabitants. (Paraphrased, *The Shadow Lines* 224)

London

Ghosh’s representation of London in *The Shadow Lines* by a curious Indian narrator-traveler, seems to be a writing back. The narrator seems to counter the Eurocentric view of travel and exploration which is generally directed to the exploration of the East. He asserts his own choice; of time, place and perspective in looking at London: “I wanted to know England not as I saw her, but in her finest hour — every place

chooses its own and to me it did not seem an accident that England had chosen hers in war" (63)

Narrator's preference for individualistic perspective is significant in the light of his friend Ila's notions of London as the centre of culture and history. Ila thinks that her life as an English citizen makes her a part of history formation. She is contemptuous of the narrator's position as he had spent his "whole life living safely in middle class suburbs in Delhi and Calcutta." According to Ila countries like "Nigeria, India, Malaysia get their inspiration from the West" and concerns in India like "famine", "riots" and "disasters" are "local" concerns.

Nonetheless, the narrator contradicts Ila's Eurocentric views and highlights concerns in Calcutta and Dhaka such as partition and riot as events which were similar to war in London. Also, he is not ready to accept Ila's London. However, he is not a closed-mind person and is able to enjoy the scene and sights of London in a way that irks Ila. She does not understand his excitement at the prospect of travelling in the *Underground*; she calls it a "bloody Concorde" and "merely a means of shifting venue":

...she would watch me as I turned to look at the advertisements flashing past us on the walls, gulped in the netherworld smell of electricity and dampness and stale deodorant, stopped to listen to the music of the buskers booming eerily through the permanent night of the passageways, and in annoyance,... she would snap at me impatiently: For God's sake stop carrying on like third-world tapioca farmer..." (*The Shadow Lines* 23).

Ila's comments are connotative of her Europocentric mindset. The narrator however does not take her views seriously as he is convinced that Ila's "practical bustling London was no less invented than mine...only very far apart."

Salman Rushdie in his essay "imaginary homeland" hints that a place revived from the memory is just "one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions." (10) Ghosh echoes Rushdie when he refers to a place as invention and everybody's ability to invent it in his own way. Like Rushdie's "double perspective" in representation of "memory" spaces; the narrator, in presenting London in *The Shadow Lines* takes up multiple perspectives; of a traveler, historian, a researcher and a day dreamer. His knowledge of the city through reading and the fascinating description by Tridib not only justifies his profound interest in the city space but also serves as frequent reference points for his present visit.

In London, apart from Ila, the narrator's acquaintances consist of the members of the Price family; Mrs Price; her son Nick and daughter May, who are old friends of Tridib's father and Ila.

The narrator surprises Ila and Nick by identifying spots and streets in London which he has never seen before. He takes Nick to the place where his uncle and Mrs Price's brother, Alan lived: "the crumbling masonry now bears a signboard of Taj Travel Agency on the ground floor." The place reminds the narrator of the fact that Alan and his friends' died in a German bomb attack during the war. He reflects on the restlessness of people in war time London: "it was not easy upstairs. The drone of the planes seemed much louder up there. And every time a bomb exploded somewhere in

the neighbourhood, a screw that had come loose in his steel bed would rattle eerily." (112)

The narrator, further, remembers how Tridib explained "a large, shallow pit" (66) in an old photograph as a "foundation of an Anderson air raid shelter", a "line of defence against the expected German bombs." He refers to a conversation between his mother Mayadebi and Mr. Tresawsen who agree that the general atmosphere of war time England "was so much nicer." (72) There was exhilaration not particular to the society of London, same could be observed even in Germany: "...it's the same over there – in Germany – though of course in a much more grotesque way. It was odd coming back here – like stepping through a looking-glass." (73) People continue to live a happy life under the knowledge that "they would not survive the war." (74)

The reality of the daily life of common citizen of London seems conflicting with the reality of war; "which was the more real, their dirty bathtubs and shared bedrooms or that other reality...the realities of bombs and torpedoes and the dying was easy to imagine – The narrator admits that no amount of imagination can help one "... know what it was like to be young and intelligent in the summer of 1939 in London or Berlin." (75)

Though the narrator appears to be primarily interested in recreating the war time London, he also underlines the current socio-economic dimensions of the city which is not untouched by the war. Nick comes back from Kuwait jobless, however, he does not expect a career prospect in England: "England's gone down the drain ... it can't afford to pay anyone properly except old age pensioners." (58) He also regrets being born late in time. Nick, rather, hopes to revive his career by marrying Ila. This implies a reversal of role as Ila has always imagined Nick to be her rescuer from a class bully. But one learns that Nick has rather been ashamed of "walking home with an Indian". (84)

Nick presents a foil to his grandfather, Lionel Tresawsen, who in spite of his humble beginning in Cornwall successfully works in many countries such as Malaysia, Fiji, Bolivia, the Guinea Coast, Ceylon and goes on to own a small factory at Calcutta. Tresawsen returns to London for the better education of his children. (56) At séances in Calcutta he befriends Tridib's grandfather, Mr Justice Chandrashekhara Datta-Chaudhuri. The friendship between Tridib's Father and Nick's Grandfather illustrates an intimate dialogue between two families, from Calcutta and London, transcending cultural, spatial, and temporal boundaries.

London as a converging point of this connection exemplifies a fluid space. Here, the narrator is able to savour dhal and puris at an Indian student's hostel while listening to bearded student leader from Allahabad. He could have a glimpse of Calcutta at Brick Lane which is not a lane: "...listening to quick exchanges in a dozen dialects of Bengali as people hurried past me, laughing and chattering, with their fingers curled into the sleeves of their anoraks, like shoppers at Gariahat on a cold winter's morning. I stopped to sniff the fragrance of rosogollas wafting out of a sweet-shop and waved to Ila and Nick to hurry." (110) The cultural flux of London is also illustrated in "small Bangladeshi place called the Maharaja in Clapham" where they are warned against expecting anything familiar: "...when the food came: every thing

fell just beyond the border of familiarity – the usual taste of spices transformed by stock and cream and Worcestershire sauce.” (266)

To sum up, the cities in *The Shadow Lines* are post-colonial spaces as they withstand the irony of imperialism that fought hard to preserve the sanctity of boundaries but failed to do so. The cityscapes of London and Calcutta, though, located far from each other, undergo identical crisis owing to conflicts arising out of identity consciousness among neighbouring nations. War in London, and partition and riots in Calcutta and Dhaka maybe different events but have similar roots and similar consequences for the people inhabiting these cities. Tridib's death in the riot in Dhaka is as tragic as Alan and his friends' death in the bomb attack in London. The near order or the daily life of common citizens is put at stake as the far order or the ruling elite in all the three cities busy themselves defining lines.

The place as “invention” appears a notable motif in the context. Tridib invents London when he describes it to the narrator. The narrator wants his own “invention” of London. He thinks that Ila's London is “invented” too. The grandmother's “home” (India) where she thinks her uncle belonged, is referred to as “her invented country.” (*The Shadow Lines* 151) The narrator's reiteration that “...we could not see without inventing what we saw” (34) implies fluidity of places and their historical representations. He “traverses borders with ease and reinvent himself with all the liberating energy implied by the post-colonial – a condition that allows for and acknowledges dissonance rather than coherence.” (Mongia 226) Ghosh's voyage to the three cities is in fact “a voyage into a land outside space, an expanse without distances; a land of looking glass events.” (*The Shadow Lines* 247)

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