LOVELY PROFESSIONAL UNIVERSITY

INDIAN WRITINGS IN LITERATURE I

Edited By

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SYLLABUS

Indian Writings in Litrature I

Objectives:

- To enhance analytical skills of students
- To improve understanding of literature among students
- To develop interest among students about Indian writing in English

Sr. No.	Content
1	Amitav Ghosh- The Shadow Lines-Introduction, Detailed study of Part I, II & III
2	Amitav Ghosh- The Shadow Lines-Theme of Nationality, Character of Tridib and grandmother, Narrative techniques
3	Rupa Bajwa- The Sari Shop- Introduction to text, Detailed study of text
4	Rupa Bajwa- The Sari Shop-Concept of feminism, Psychological study
5	Rupa Bajwa- The Sari Shop-Theme, Character and Plot construction

CONTENTS

Unit 1: Amitav Ghosh; Shadow Lines: Introduction to the Text 1
Digvijay Pandya, Lovely Professional University

Unit 2: Amitav Ghosh; Shadow Lines: Detailed Study of Part—I (A Bird's Eye View) 20
Gowher Ahmad Naik, Lovely Professional University

Unit 3: Amitav Ghosh—Shadow Lines: Detailed Study—II (Plot and Criticisms) 31
Gowher Ahmad Naik, Lovely Professional University

Unit 4: Amitav Ghosh: Shadow Lines: Detailed Study of Part —III (Critical Appreciation) 39
Digvijay Pandya, Lovely Professional University

Unit 5: Amitav Ghosh: Shadow Lines: Theme of Nationality 46
Digvijay Pandya, Lovely Professional University

Unit 6: Amitav Ghosh: Shadow Lines: Characterisation 51
Gowher Ahmad Naik, Lovely Professional University

Unit 7: Amitav Ghosh: Shadow Lines—Narrative Techniques 62
Gowher Ahmad Naik, Lovely Professional University

Unit 8: Rupa Bajwa: Sari Shop—Introduction to the Text 68
Digvijay Pandya, Lovely Professional University

Unit 9: Rupa Bajwa: Sari Shop—Concept of Feminism 75
Digvijay Pandya, Lovely Professional University

Unit 10: Rupa Bajwa: Sari Shop—Detailed Study of the Text 82
Gowher Ahmad Naik, Lovely Professional University

Unit 11: Rupa Bajwa: Sari Shop—Theme 90
Gowher Ahmad Naik, Lovely Professional University

Unit 12: Rupa Bajwa: Sari Shop—Characterisation and Plot Construction 98
Digvijay Pandya, Lovely Professional University

Unit 13: Rupa Bajwa: Sari Shop—Psychological Study 104
Gowher Ahmad Naik, Lovely Professional University

Notes

Unit 1: Amitav Ghosh; Shadow Lines: Introduction to the Text

CONTENTS

Objectives
Introduction
1.1 The Shadow Line—An Introduction
1.2 Characters
1.3 Amitav Ghosh's Works: A Critical Sketch
1.4 Critical Appreciation of the Novel
1.5 Important Aspects of the Novel
1.6 Summary
1.7 Key-Words
1.8 Review Questions
1.9 Further Readings

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Know about an Indian Bengali writer Amitav Ghosh.
- Discuss the Plot Summary.

Introduction

The Shadow Lines (1988) is a Sahitya Akademi Award-winning novel by Indian-Bengali writer Amitav Ghosh. It is a book that captures perspective of time and events, of lines that bring people together and hold them apart, lines that are clearly visible from one perspective and nonexistent from another. Lines that exist in the memory of one, and therefore in another's imagination. A narrative built out of an intricate, constantly crisscrossing web of memories of many people, it never pretends to tell a story. Rather it invites the reader to invent one, out of the memories of those involved, memories that hold mirrors of differing shades to the same experience. The novel is set against the backdrop of historical events like Swadeshi movement, Second World War, Partition of India and Communal riots of 1963-64 in Dhaka and Calcutta. The novel brought its author the 1989 Sahitya Akademi Award for English, by the Sahitya Akademi, India's National Academy of Letters.

1.1 The Shadow Line—An Introduction

A young, inexperienced, but competent seaman suddenly gives up his successful position as mate on a steamship. Whilst he is on shore in Singapore an older and experienced sea captain recommends him to the harbour master, as a result of which he is given command of a sailing ship whose captain has died at sea. He travels to Bangkok to take charge of the ship and feels that he is joining an illustrious brotherhood of distinguished former commanders. However, he learns from the chief mate that the previous captain was dissolute and neglected his duties, The chief mate was forced to take charge of the ship, and the captain cursed the ship and all its crew before dying.

The new young captain is delayed in Bangkok by a combination of official procedures and the chief mate's illness. He seeks medical advice, but impatient to be underway with his new

Notes

commission, he disregards the warnings and sets sail in unfavourable conditions. The journey progresses very slowly because of a lack of wind, and the ship becomes becalmed in the Gulf of Siam. Meanwhile all the crew are infected with malaria, and the chief mate appears to be dying. The mate believes that an evil influence from the previous captain is casting a jinx on the ship.

The young captain then suddenly discovers that the supplies of quinine he has been using to treat his crew have been stolen and sold by the previous captain, who has re-filled the bottles with useless stuff. The captain is supported in all his attempts to keep going by the ship's cook, who has a bad heart. The chief mate recovers slightly, but the ship makes no progress. The captain in despair decides to abandon the voyage and return to Singapore. En route the ship encounters a tropical thunderstorm, and the captain has to maintain the safety of the ship with the help of only two or three sick crew members. The chief mate goes through a phase of near madness in which he believes that they are battling against evil forces of the former captain, who he personally buried at sea in the same part of the Gulf. Finally, the ship reaches Singapore, the crew are taken off to hospital, and the cook requests to be discharged from his duties. The captain recruits a replacement crew and is planning to resume his voyage the very next day, feeling older and wiser.

1.2 Characters

- Narrator – The protagonist is a middle class boy who grows up in a middle-class family.
- Tridib – He was the son of Mayadebi, and so by relation he was the second uncle of Narrator.
- Grandmother of Narrator (Tha'mma) – She is the headmistress of girls school in Calcutta. She is very strict, disciplined, hardworking, mentally strong and patient lady.
- Ila – She is the cousin of narrator. She lives in Stockwell, London. She is very good looking.
- May – She is the daughter of Prices family.
- Nick – He is a good looking blonde having long hair and wants to become a Chartered Accountant. In the course of the novel he marries Ila.

1.3 Amitav Ghosh's Works: A Critical Sketch

Amitav Ghosh is one of the better-known Indian Writers writing in English today. Born in 1956 in Calcutta, he had his school education at the famous residential Doon School in Dehradun. Though he belonged to a middle class Bengali family, his childhood had varied influences that set him apart from the typical *Bhadralok* (middle class) value system. While growing up in his grandfather's Kolkata home where the sitting room was lined with bookshelves, (he talks about it in the award winning essay "The Testimony of my Grandfather's Bookcase") Ghosh became a voracious reader. By the age of 12, he had devoured Mikhail Sholokhov's *And Quiet Flows the Don*, a gift from an uncle. He admits in an interview that in the Bengali culture writing is greatly valued and that was his inspiration. His father, Lt Col. Shailendra Chandra Ghosh served the British army in Myanmar and was an avid storyteller. These stories about the exotic lands told to him as a young boy were to greatly affect the canvas of his imagination He also admits as to how these early family experiences were to have a far reaching influence on his literary creations. He quotes the example of *The Glass Palace* (2000) that grew out of his uncle Jagat Chandra Dutta's experiences as a timber merchant in Myanmar. The fact that the family was constantly on the move, owing to his father's official assignments, also had its effect on young Amitav. Even though he was in a boarding school he got to visit and live in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. "Because of that I could understand what it is like to be a Sri Lankan and a Bangladeshi in relationship with 'India," he says. This sensibility pervades many of his works and one sees that the Indian Subcontinent is frequently decentered from Delhi to other capitals like Dhaka and Mandalay.

He graduated from Delhi University and with an Inlaks scholarship went to Oxford for his DPhil in Social Anthropology and Philosophy. During his research he came across the papers of a 12th century Tunisian Jew, Abraham Ben Yiju, in a Cairo synagogue. He learnt from the papers that he had come to Mangalore via Egypt and lived there for 17 years. This formed the seminal idea of

Notes

what would be Ghosh's third book, *In An Antique Land (1992).* Ghosh returned to India in 1982, and worked in the Centre For Developmental Studies in Thiruvananthapuram (Kerela) for a year. He describes the period as the most peaceful in his life. He started work on his first book *The Circle of Reason (1986)* while still in Kerela and completed it in Delhi. He talks of his days in Delhi and his struggle as a fledgling writer. He says in an interview "I was living in the servant's quarters on top of someone's house. With the Delhi sun beating down at the height of the summer, I would sit in a *lungi* and furiously punch away at my typewriter." His writing career began at the Indian Express newspaper in New Delhi and in 1986 his first novel, *The Circle Of Reason*, went on to win one of France's top literary awards, the Prix Medici Etrangere. His writing career had taken off well from here on and subsequent years saw him becoming a recipient of many coveted awards, including the 1999 Pushcart Prize and the Arthur C. Clarke Award for his highbrow thriller, *The Calcutta Chromosome (1996)* Witnessing the 1984 Anti-Sikh riots in Delhi in the wake of Indira Gandhi's assassination had a profound effect on him. "I think it was essentially after the 1984 riots that people recognised the dimension of the communal problem in India." He wrote about it in The New Yorker and it became a point of departure for his novel *The Shadow Lines (1988)*. Though the book does not deal with the '84 riots per se, it has dealt with the pathology of riots and civil strife in a more encompassing manner.

In the year 2001 he was in news for having withdrawn his book *The Glass Palace* from the shortlist of Commonwealth Writer's Award because he felt that such awards continue to abet the very institutions (the British Empire) that he tries to fight through his writings. In a letter written to the Prize Manager of the foundation he contests the very idea behind Commonwealth as a category… 'As a literary or cultural grouping … it seems to me that "the Commonwealth" can only be a misnomer so long as it excludes the many languages that sustain the cultural and literary lives of these countries. …the ways in which we remember the past are not determined solely by the brute facts of time: they are also open to choice, reflection and judgment. The issue of how the past is to be remembered lies at the heart of The Glass Palace and I feel that I would be betraying the spirit of my book if I were to allow it to be incorporated within that particular memorialization of Empire that passes under the rubric of "the Commonwealth".' The literary community hailed this withdrawal as being exemplary and worthy of emulation. On the subject of recreating historical events through his novels, he draws up the distinction between 'state history' and 'human history.' He says in an interview that the difference between the history historians writes and the history fiction writers write is that the latter write about 'human history'… 'it is about finding out the human predicament. It is about finding out what happens to human individuals, characters…on the other hand is the kind of history exploring causes…Causality is of no interest to me.' In these times driven by media, Ghosh has consciously cultivated a low profile. He believes that the excessive pressures created by the *media circus* (as he calls it) on young writers cripple their creativity and take attention off the most important task: that of writing. Ghosh is presently based in America, where he first met his wife, Deborah Baker, who is a senior editor with the publishers Little, Brown and Company. After teaching anthropology and comparative literature in various universities in America, Ghosh is now distinguished professor of Comparative Literature at Queens College, City University of New York. He lives in New York with his wife and children, Leela and Nayan.

1.4 Critical Appreciation of the Novel

The Shadow Lines (1988) can be viewed at one level as a story of a Bengali family through which the author presents, analyses and problematises many issues that are being debated in contemporary India. The story cleverly engages in its main body characters spanning three generations of this family. The story of these characters is not told in a contextual vacuum, it instead corresponds to the growth of Calcutta as a city and India as a nation over a period of three decades or more. Significantly, private events in the author's life and other important characters take place in the shadow of events of immense political significance. The family too is not there typically as a spectacle but as a means to 'discuss' these issues that are at the heart of this work. So there is Tha'mma, the grandmother of the unnamed narrator through whom the issue of the Bengal Partition

Notes

and the whole idea of **Nation**, Nationalism and Nationhood gets discussed. There is Tridib, the eccentric Historian cousin through whom the idea of **history** being problematic gets highlighted. Then there is the third generation Ila, the narrator's second cousin through whom the author brings to fore the issues of **diaspora** and **racism.** The role of the narrator is also central to the extent that it is he who articulates the ideas held by these characters and also integrates these subjective viewpoints and experiences to highlight that both public discourses like history and personal discourse like anecdotes are incomplete till they are integrated. The role of the narrator is also crucial to the structure of the novel, which is one of story within story told in a non-linear way. The novel has also been analysed by the critic Suvir Kaul in the essay "Separation Anxiety: Growing Up Inter/National in *The Shadow Lines*" as embodying elements from the ***bildungsroman*** (coming of age) tradition of the novel. M.H.Abrams describes the term *bildungsroman* as a 'novel of formation'… 'the subject of these novels is the development of the protagonist's mind and character, as he passes from childhood through varied experiences –and usually through a spiritual crisis – into maturity and recognition of his identity and role in the world.'

Did u know? The Shadow Lines witnesses the growth of the narrator from an impressionable 8 year old in the Gole Park flat in Calcutta to an assured adult through the book.

However, the growth of the narrator is not physical alone but seen in relation with the growth of ideas on '… nationalism, nation states and international relations…the narrator's itinerary into adulthood …is necessarily framed by these larger public questions…it becomes not merely a male *bildungsroman,* an authorized autobiography, with its obvious agendas and priorities, but also a dialogic, more open-ended telling of the difficult interdependencies and inequalities that compose any biography of a nation.' The novel begins with the eight-year-old narrator talking of his experiences as a schoolboy living in the Gole-Park neighbourhood in Calcutta. He introduces the reader to the two branches of his family tree- the families of his Grandmother Tha'mma and that of the Grandmother's sister, Mayadebi. According to the acclaimed critic Meenakshi Mukherjee this rendition in the novel amongst other details helps the reader feel the 'concreteness of the existential and emotional milieu…the precise class location of his family, Bengali *bhadralok*, starting at the lower edge of the spectrum and ascending to its higher reaches in one generation, with family connections above and below its own station…' The grandmother is a schoolteacher and the father is a middle rung manager in a tyre company. The family of Mayadebi is more affluent, her husband being a high-ranking official in the foreign services, with one son, Jatin being an economist with the UN and the younger one Robi being a Civil Servant. Only Tridib of her sons is not successful in the material sense, however of his ability the reader is left in no doubt as even though eccentric, he is the one who is the repository of all the esoteric knowledge. He can talk on length about issues as diverse as the sloping roofs of Columbian houses and the culture of the Incas with equal ease. He is also the one who transfers to the young narrator a profound love for knowledge. The sisters Tha'mma and Mayadebi are thick with each other, however the former is perennially on her guard on the issue of accepting help from the latter. In this regard it is important to talk about her past experiences. As a young woman living in Dhaka (prior to Bengal Partition) she is married off to an Engineer posted in Burma. However she loses her husband very early and is left with the prospect of raising her only son single handedly. What follows is her struggle to make ends meet and her subsequent career as a schoolteacher in Bengal. She raises her only child independently and lives a spartan life where *wasted time stinks*. Her self worth goads her to abstain from becoming dependent on her affluent relations. In the midst of the narrative she retires from school and her life really comes a full circle. One of the important facets of Tha'mma's worldview that we have to consider is her perception of historical events and her notions of Nationhood and Nationalism. As a young woman she finds herself in the greatly charged milieu of 19th century Bengal when the Extremist strand of Nationalism was in its full glory. As a college going young woman she upholds these young extremists as her true heroes and secretly desires to be a part of such extremist organizations as *Anushilan* and *Jugantar*. She idealises these young men who indulge

Notes

in clandestine extremism with the larger goal of Independence in mind. At the same time as a product of Western Education, her idea of Nation as an entity is borrowed in its entirety from England. She tends to associate gory wars passion, sacrifice and blood baths with the creation and grandeur of nations. 'War is their (the English) religion. That's what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this or that…that's what you have to achieve for India.' She particularly likes her nephew Robi who, according to her, has besides, a fine education a fine body that is essential for the enterprise of nation building. To the fact that she is a dislocated Bengali (from the Eastern side) she does not pay much attention and like a typical middle class character is too involved in matters of livelihood to bother about these issues. Life is simple for her- she believes in the values of honesty and hard work and has been a tremendously scrupulous teacher and mother. She believes so completely in the ideal of hard work that when she meets her poor migrant relatives she can think of no other reason but lack of hard work as the reason for their penury. She gives no thought to the event of Partition that is partly responsible for the dislocation and destitution of the family. It is only when she plans to visit her sister in Dhaka and when she has to undergo the usual procedure of compiling her immigration papers that she is jolted into recognizing the reality of the Partition of her state. The author here delves into the whole idea behind physical and psychological spaces. Here the author talks of *Phantom distances* through the ***shadow lines*** that the state machinery creates in order to reinforce the idea of nation. Whereas in a large country like India where diversity abounds in every aspect of cultural, economic, social and linguistic existence nationhood is imposed over these ***imagined communities*** and ironically where communities exist naturally (like in the pre-partitioned Bengal) they are thrown apart with barbed wire fencing, passports and papers reinforcing a much greater psychological distance between the two. Her visit to her erstwhile home in Dhaka also turns out to be poignant in ways more than one. Her uncle (father's brother) is the only one languishing in that house because he is completely out of touch with reality and refuses to believe the fact that the country has split. Here the author echoes the idea of collective madness and normalcy. Whereas the uncle who refuses to believe in the Partition of the country is labelled mad by the so called normal people, it is in a way a collective madness that has endorsed the highly abnormal act of Partition and then driven the non conformists to the edge of madness. This old man also portrays the **violence** that **history** perpetrates. Whereas this violence is a part of the life of all the people who underwent the distresses of dislocation during Partition, it can only find an expression through the grotesque means of madness. And there is escape from it also through madness. The character of Tha'mma is crucial to the narrative in the manner in which it brings out some of these concepts and also provides a rallying point around which other ways of looking at these are built. Tha'mma embodies a conventional even though interesting belief system, which is challenged by the other characters as well as the novelist himself. For most part of the book she comes across as a frugal, no-nonsense woman for whom any wastage of time or money is abhorrence. She is a principled old woman whose views on nation and nation building are remarkably simplistic. She doesn't consider herself as a migrant belonging to the other side of the border; she has no sympathy for her refugee relatives living in a state of utter penury. Her notions of nation, nation building are straight from history books. She considers healthy young people like Robi as ideal nation builders. She is remarkably free from all traces of cynicism so evocative of victims of partition.

She does not consciously criticize the phenomenon of Partition even once, there are no lengthy harangues: her critique of the Partition, nation and nationalism lies in her anecdotes. Often it is the anecdotes and the personal experiences that make her acknowledge the cracks and contradictions in her beliefs. Tha'mma as a child in Dhaka house makes stories about the disputed upside down house (the other half of the house occupied by the uncle's family) The artificial constructedness of the **'otherness'** of the house is very evident and many critics have seen it as a foretaste of a similar exercise that the state indulges in when the Partition of a nation has to be justified and difference has to be created if it does not exist. The two nations just like the two parts of a household were united at one time but the course of history (or failure of vision) divides them and for sustaining their separation the difference has to be created. The case of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent has been very different because the state has been forced to create a difference where none existed and show the two nations as inherently opposed.

Notes

It is the fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets that one inhabits, can suddenly and without warning become as hostile as a desert in a flash flood. It is this that sets apart the thousand million people who inhabit the subcontinent from the rest of the world-not language, not food, not music-it is the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of the war between oneself and one's image in the mirror. The house trope used in the novel is for obvious reasons of making the reader see through such an act when it comen to the country : what is ironic is that Tha'mma who should have *seen through* it is blissfully oblivious of the strategy.

Perhaps this oblivion is tantamount to a deliberate non-admission of facts that are deeply disturbing to her. Here the two reactions of madness that we examined earlier can be compared to the non admission of events, a denial that the individual resorts to in order to avoid the madness that is bound to follow later. The oblivion of Tha'mma therefore becomes her survival strategy. However an indicator of this deep complex does surface later. Her decision to go to Dhaka in order to bring back her old sick uncle is a very upsetting time for her. Routine activity of furnishing her personal details while finishing the documentation for her visa forms raise fundamental doubts within her about her identity. The sane formulations of her life are threatened by some dull looking External Affairs Ministry forms. For the first time the sure shot, unruffled Tha'mma goes through pangs of some fundamentally disturbing introspection. She wonders as to how the 'place of her birth had come to be messily at odds with her nationality'. She cannot resolve the chaos that surfaces in the patterns that are so essential to her identity. The narrator at this point cleverly talks of certain language constructions in the Bengali language: You see, in our family we don't know whether we are coming or going- It's all my grandmother's fault… But of course the fault wasn't hers at all: it lay in the language. Every language assumes a centrality fixed and settled point to go away and come back to, and what my grandmother was looking for was a word for a journey which was not coming or going at all : a journey that was a search for precisely that fixed point which permits the proper use of verbs of movement. According to Nivedita Bagchi there is ' a peculiar construction in the Bengali language which allows the speaker to say "aaschi" (coming) instead of "jachchhi" (going)'…which is 'especially used as an equivalent to "good-bye".

Thus a Bengali speaker while leaving a place is apt to say, "I am coming (back) instead of "I am going."' The grandmother's Bengali verbs that confuse the simple acts of coming and going become a part of the family's lore. Young people in the family joke about this language feature that confuses movement of two opposite kinds. But interestingly, within this feature of the Bengali language lies a critique of the migration of populations during the Partition of 1947. If, therefore Tha'mma says "aaschi" (I am coming) before leaving for Dhaka, it is to be read as an announcement of her arrival to her erstwhile home rather than a *faux pas* that confuses coming and going. All going away therefore culminates only in a coming of a very different kind. The fault therefore obliquely points at the chaos of coming and going that there is in Tha'mma's world rather than in her language. This claim is further confirmed by the fact that the book has two sub-sections: *Going Away and Coming home*. Both phrases indicate the queer sense of home and homelessness that the Partition victims have experienced that allows them to dispense with a fixed point that signifies a point of departure. It is also interesting to note why a common language feature should invite ridicule from the speakers themselves. It is foregrounded to draw the reader's attention towards the *fault* of Partition, neither that of the language nor that of Tha'mma. Specific addresses are remarkably highlighted in *The Shadow Lines*, the house at Raibajar, the narrator's house in Gole Park, Lymington Road, the Price household, the Shodor bazaar in Dhaka and the feud-ridden Dhaka house. All these are real enough to be plotted on a street atlas. These intricate addresses have a strong power of evocation and add to the verisimilitude of the narrative. Infact these specific addresses have a power that emanates from their permanence. These addresses are more than a mere assistance in discovering location, they are the units that survive civil political and private strife and yet remain unchanged. In this way if compared to nations as entities, specific locations outdo them in endurance. Nations are born, nations die, the cartographers and politicians rearrange political spaces but these locations are remarkably immune to these designs. They thus become the fixities and entities with 'semiotic signification' that provide meaning to several characters, their concerns and their identities. This further becomes an instance of a personal space

Notes

(and if these addresses can be seen as personal narratives) outdoing a public one. Specific addresses in the novel subvert the idea of the nation in the novel.

The narrator's eccentric cousin Tridib is an unconventional character who does not fit into the genteel society of his family. He is conducting research into the ancient Sena dynasty of Bengal and is repeatedly shown engrossed in his study. Tridib does not merely happen to be a scholar of Ancient history writing a thesis on the lost Sena Empire, his' is indeed a voice that bears the burden of a historical vision. Right from the beginning of the novel there is in him a deep consciousness about the enterprise of knowledge. He not only collects esoteric bits of knowledge, the range of which stretches from East European Jazz to the intricate sociological patterning of the Incas religiously but also shapes his own and the narrator's orientation towards it. Tridib is a stock character Bengali literature and folklore is replete with. Images of such figures abound, so whether it is the distant uncle in Satyajeet Ray's film *Agantuk* or as Meenakshi Mukherjee in the essay 'Maps and Mirrors: Coordinates of Meaning in *The Shadow Lines'* points out the 'traveller/ imaginist reminding the Bengali reader occasionally of the *Ghana –da* stories by Premananda Mitra and …*Pheluda* stories by Satyajeet Ray in both of which a boy is held spell bound by a somewhat older person's encyclopedic knowledge of other lands and civilizations.'

The narrator gets his first lessons on the business of scholarship from Tridib-he is presented with a Bartholomew's Atlas as a childhood gift which remains a symbol of this transference and which resurfaces years later in the author's hostel room in Delhi-thus signifying a lasting influence that Tridib has on the narrator and the uncle's symbolic gift of *the worlds to travel in and the eyes to see them with.* That he receives Tridib's gift of this knowledge thereafter becomes a kind of etanarrative that the author will subsequently want to break out of and interrogate. However there is another aspect of Tridib that the author shows- that of a glib talker. Tridib, the eccentric uncle of the narrator has an audience in the people of the *addas* in the Calcutta neighbourhood of Gole Park. Nivedita Bagchi in the essay 'The Process of Validation In Relation To Materiality and Historical Reconstruction in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines '* defines the Bengali word *adda* which is seen as the place of dissemination of the historian's (Tridib's) discourse. According to Bagchi the Bengali word describes 'long, leisurely conversations within a group of people which characterises a Bengali day.' She further states that the acknowledgement of the Bengali community within the narrative is a feature of the oral narrative where the narrative is the secret of the community which further links to the idea that narratives are connected to an identifiable group. He takes on the center stage in these public street corners where people pour over *chai* and talk quotidian concerns. He is more of a performer than historian in these spaces. The Tridib of the *addas* exaggerates and manipulates information for an audience that listens to him in rapt attention with their mouths gaped in awe of his knowledge. There is another space that Tridib occupies, that of his book lined quiet room in his family house in Calcutta. The narrator confesses 'it was that Tridib that I liked the best: I was a bit unsure of the Tridib of the street corners.' Tha'mma, too thinks this behaviour at the *addas* as totally abominable and a way of making his *time stink*. What is it about Tridib of the *addas* that is distrustful? The book in describing Tridib of the *addas* and his behavioural pattern there and by ascribing to him certain statements (he lies to the audience about his just concluded trip to London) only highlights a very important issue that the book deals with: that of the **seat of the Historian** and how he occupies it in **disseminating knowledge**. It is also significant to note that here we come into contact with two facets of a historian: the diligent, quiet fact-finder and the powerful, loud mouthed one in public sphere and through the latter the book goes on to throw some questions about the political role of history.

The narrator gets a lesson in combining precision and **imagination** as a strategy of gaining knowledge from Tridib. The employment of imagination being necessary because a historian does not and cannot possibly has an access to all the relevant sites of the event all the time. The time and space of a historically important event may be removed many throws from the historian in which case the quality of his mastery on the event becomes dependent on his own imagination or either the imagination of historians before him. The compound word *precise-imagination* also becomes a paradox in bringing the limiting, exacting precision to bear upon the soaring, sky kissing imagination. The perspicuity of vision that the narrator cultivates thereafter by this lesson is

Notes

evident in his extraordinary reactions to the space of London during his visit. He not only recognizes old buildings that Tridib had merely mentioned to him as a child, but with the same eloquence questions missing ones, the ones bombed out in action and the like. The old club building that Tridib had fondly talked about to the narrator years ago is intact in his imagination decades later while on a visit to London. His suggestions of its existence are brushed aside by his cousin Ila whose opinion is supported by the club's absence, however the external evidence fails to satisfy him and after much effort they find out from an old timer that the club had indeed existed at the exact spot that he had pointed out and that it had been targetted during a war and reduced to rubble. The author's theoretical knowledge, therefore, of the existence of the building beats the Ila's very real but thoughtless existence. Tridib's vision works, at the same time he has the historian's itch to classify and know events *completely* rather than experience them spontaneously as Ila does. Tridib as a young man falls in love with May who is the daughter of the Price family of England. The friendship of the Datta- Chaudhary family and the Prices goes back to the Colonial times when their English grandfather, Tresawsen had come to Calcutta as an agent of a steel-manufacturing company and had later become a factory owner. The relationship between Tridib and May starts from exchange of friendly letters till the one that Tridib writes. In his letter he proposes to her by elaborately describing an intimate lovemaking episode between two people in a war ravaged theatre house in London. He proposes to meet her 'as a stranger in a ruin…. as completest of strangers, strangers-across seas' without context or history. May is initially perplexed but cannot resist his 'invitation' and finally reaches India to see him. However soon the romance in the relationship is replaced by discord. They assign meanings to happenings and things around them differently. While driving along with the child narrator towards Diamond Harbour they come across an injured, profusely bleeding and badly mauled dog. While the narrator shuts his eyes to escape the *ugly* sight, Tridib drives on with a nonchalance that shocks May completely. She asks him to drive back to the mangled animal after which follows her extraordinary show of endurance and fortitude with which she relieves the animal of its pain by assisting it to a peaceful death. Exasperated by the whole experience she tells Tridib in a huff that *he is worth words alone.*

The quality of activism that we see in May resurfaces in London years later when she collects donations for destitute children. This is in sharp contrast to Tridib who is an armchair historian and lives and feeds on ideas alone. A similar situation arises in Dhaka while they along with Tha'mma, Mayadebi and child Robi are trapped in the communal frenzy that takes place while they are bringing back the old uncle left behind in Dhaka since Independence. While they meander through the riot ravaged streets of the city in their chauffeur driven car, the old uncle is following them in a rickshaw steered by the Muslim who looks after him. May observes how the mob which first turned to them, on being repulsed, attacked the old man on the rickshaw and instead of saving him, Tha'mma displays the same non-chalance that Tridib had earlier shown towards the dog and asks the driver to drive on without looking back. May is struck with the old impulse and getting out of the car, she heads towards the mob to save the old man. Tridib cannot allow her to embrace death and therefore follows her. In the melee, the mob attacks Tridib and he is killed. The incident powerfully evokes the earlier dog episode and the promise that Tridib gets from May at that time, about giving him too the peaceful death like the dog if a situation ever arose, uncannily turns true. Of this incident the narrator gets to know only in the end when dissatisfied with other people's versions, he asks May to recount to him the cause of Tridib's death. The incident as recounted by May becomes like that missing part of the jigsaw puzzle of Tridib's death that the author is trying to look for. Ila, the narrator's cousin is another important influence on the young, impressionable narrator. She, owing to her father's job is a globetrotter and comes to settle in London. Her experience of places as diverse as Colombo and Cairo and her school years at all these exotic places woven into delightful anecdotes for the child narrator initiate for the latter his first ever flights of imagination. Along with Tridib's encyclopedic knowledge, it is cousin Ila's descriptions of her vibrant life abroad that give the narrator a flight outside the confines of his drab Gole Park flat. The cousin's colourful Annual Schoolbooks become his initiators into an unseen but alluring world outside. For Ila the immediacy of experience –personal/political is so overwhelmingly important that its context and historicity remains suspended in the background. Earlier the mere description of the city of Cairo brings to the mind of the atlas educated, historically

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aware narrator, the first pointed arch in the history of mankind whereas for Ila 'Cairo is merely a place to piss in.' She flits from experience to experience with a heightened sensual gusto but failing to 'arrive' at any stage in the novel to 16 a state of greater knowledge, insight or evolution. Tridib often said of her that 'the inventions she lived in moved with her, so that although she had lived in many places she had not travelled at all.' 'For Ila the current was the real: it was as though she lived in a present which was like an airlock in a canal, shut away from the tidewaters of past and future by steel flood gates.' However this uninhibited flow of experience in her throws up certain questions that the other narratives have either suppressed, not acknowledged or either failed to account for. This realm does not have history's linear progression of and no casts to mould and reshape experience.

Her experience as an Indian in London becomes another model of citizenship that the book explores along with Partition Diaspora and the modern Calcutta Middle class. However her personal experience first as a student in London and later that of marrying a white man throws up an entire polemics about the diasporic communities. When she narrates the story about the fantasy child Magda to the narrator, it is quite evident that the child is a consequence of her mixed marriage (owing to the child's blue eyes and fair complexion). The absolute dread that she associates with the imagined classroom of the child betrays her own sense of complexity as a woman faced with questions about race in a mixed marriage. In this regard it is important that Ila in this conversation displays a hyper emotionality, enough indication of some deep complex of feelings within her about race. Finally when Nick betrays her, her insecurity as a woman and especially as a one disadvantaged due to her race comes out in the open. Her life comes full circle from that anxious schoolgirl boasting about nonexistent boyfriends to the distraught adult finding it difficult to come to terms with an unfaithful husband. 'You see you've never understood; you've always been taken in by the way I used to talk in college. I only talked like that to shock you and because you seemed to expect it of me somehow. I never did any of those things: I'm about as chaste …as any woman you'll ever meet.' The narrator is introduced as an eight-year-old child who is ensconced in a genteel middle-class existence where young children are concerned only with doing well in studies. However the narrator finds means to escape it through his uncle Tridib who sensitizes him to the exciting enterprise of acquiring knowledge. The narrator is gifted an Atlas as a birthday gift and that becomes a symbol of sorts for the 'transference of knowledge' that takes place between the two. What the narrator acquires from Tridib is an extraordinary sensitivity towards knowledge, which later becomes crucial to the role of narration that he undertakes. The narrator is not only a storyteller but also the strand that brings together other available versions in order to make a complete picture. It is significant that the author himself comes across as more of a storyteller than a historian or an anecdote teller. Stories in this book are in circuitry, without definite beginnings and endings, they are indiscrete and seem to belong to no one. Here it is pertinent to point out that the author, inspite of his omniscience, is unnamed and his stories are mostly in the form of renderings of the other characters. These stories become more intelligible when the narrator joins them into meaningful wholes after collecting all the possible versions of the incident described from various sources. A case in point is the truth behind Tridib's death in Dhaka. Tha'mma, Mayadebi, Tridib's girlfriend May and Robi are the eyewitnesses to the lynching of Tridib during the Dhaka riots. His death, its cause and manner is however not made known to the narrator in its entirety: the parents are reluctant to reveal anything just like middle class people are used to avoiding all the talk of death in front of young children. The child Robi talks of the experience with a hyper emotionality characteristic of a traumatic childhood experience that he hasn't let go off even as an adult. At a later time Robi as an adult recounts all that happens while on an evening out with the narrator and Ila. His account is complete to the extent that he as a child can only observe partially. His partial perception is not only a result of his intellectual inadequacy but also due to the fact that he is physically limited- 'an effect of that difference in perspective which causes all objects recalled from childhood to undergo an illusory enlargement of scale'- this makes him incapable of even observing the incident objectively. His account of the incident is therefore more of a cathartic outburst because it has been long repressed than an informative or insightful reconstruction of the past. The last strand in the experience is May to whom the narrator then turns for an adequate explanation. It is in London that the narrator gets to know the truth behind the death.

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Another aspect of modern India that the narrator brings out through the novel is the typical 20th Century phenomenon of **Civil strife** and rioting especially the one that results from communal discord. It is important to mention here that *The Shadow Lines* written in 1988 was the author's response to another unprecedented event in Post-Colonial Indian scene: the 1984 Anti-Sikh riots that swept the nation after the then Prime minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards. To begin with allegedly State sponsored these riots in their magnitude were comparable to the earlier communal frenzy of 1947 partition. The novel situates the 1964 communal riots in Calcutta experienced by the narrator as a young school going boy centrally in the boy's psyche as well as in his analysis of the difference of perception that pervades the recording of such incidents. In the book these riots and the riots at Dhaka become the occasion for the acid test of our recording systems whether of our history or of our newspapers. The author does a brilliant job by the use of excessive and mundane journalese that drowns the powerful dominance that it exerts in the author's consciousness. The author finds an inadequate portrayal of such historical events in these sources and then goes on to analyze the reasons behind such silences:

By the end of January 1964 the riots had faded away from the pages of the newspapers, disappeared from the collective imagination of 'responsible opinion', vanished without leaving a trace in the histories and bookshelves. They had dropped out of memory into the crater of a volcano of silence. The theatre of war where the Generals meet is the stage on which the states disport themselves: they have no use for the memory of riots. Through an extensive description of a day during the 1964 Calcutta riots, the narrator tells us of his experiences of the day as a school student. Through the day he along with the other children are caught in a fear psychosis while going to school. He describes the empty bus ride home where the driver falters, drives into wrong lanes and makes all the unexpected detours into unknown, deserted lanes of Calcutta to escape the mad mob. Years later while talking of the incident to his College friends in Delhi he is surprised to find that none of them seem to remember the fateful day.

Eager to prove his memory right he leads some of them to the archives where he digs out old papers to support his memory. To his dismay, the newspapers paint the incident in regular *journalese.* While reading retrospectively about his own experience of communal riots in Calcutta as a child, he stumbles upon other events of the fateful day, one of which is a description of a similar riot in Dhaka. It is at this time that he is able to link up the two seemingly unrelated events and the fact strikes him that it was indeed the same riot in Dhaka that had claimed its victim in Tridib. What the others in his college cannot even seem to remember owing to their location in places that are far from Calcutta, is ironically a mirror experience of people in another country (Khulna, Bangladesh, then in Pakistan), 'the two cities face each other at a watchful equidistance across the border.' What follows is the author's meditation on the idea of distance as a physical reality and as a political and psychological construct. The insignificant physical distance between the two cities (earlier one community) is stretched to an unfathomable, unconquerable political and psychological distance, often making them as different as two civilisations. Returning to civil strife and its portrayal, why are there these silences in History? Probably because, the author says, these do not cohere well with constructs like a nation that the state has so painfully nurtured earlier: 'the madness of a riot is a pathological inversion, but also therefore, a reminder of that indivisible sanity that binds people independently of their governments. And that prior, independent relationship is the natural enemy of the government, for it is the logic of states that to exist at all they must claim the monopoly of all relation between people... ' Is history, then an objective telling of the past events or choosing what to write in order that the underlying form is not distorted? It chooses to write about that which serves it while the rest is irretrievably silenced. The author points out that the silence he sees in history results when happenings cannot be accounted for in a given manner 'the kind of natural silence that descends when nearness / distance, friend /enemy become terms that are impossible to define.

However, these definitions in the first place become difficult because artificial differences are imposed by the state. Riots and their memory become a case in point because as Ghosh puts it they are an instance of 'pathological inversion' -i.e. violence of a state turning inwards unlike in other conflicts like war where it turns outwards. The clear definition of enemy/friend, ingroup/outgroup,

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I/other becomes difficult. Who is to be described as a perpetrator and who the victim becomes problematic for the state and also the reasons, if documented, subvert the idea of the idea of the nation, therefore having no value for the governments as historical object. It is because of this choice based reportage that history is said to have an underlying literary structure. In the event of wars, on the other hand there is a well-defined enemy, a self-righteous *we group* and a legitimate action that reaffirms our notions of nationhood and our projected ideology. So there is a glory to wars, which is also violence, but one that makes sense within our defined notions of the ideas described above.

1.5 Important Aspects of the Novel

1. Treatment of History

Simply put history is the recording of actions of human beings done in the past, however if seen as a discipline that is specific to societies, one can see its significance as a disseminator of ideas. The earlier definition sees the act of recording as essentially unproblematic which is what has driven Western Historiography since Enlightenment when the content and methodology of what constitutes the subject of history today first got formulated. It was only in the twentieth century that this act of recording got problematised. Collingwood in *Idea of History (1946*) was one of the early historians to shift the emphasis from the act of objective recording outside events to the subjective realm of the historian's mind. He saw history as the record of past thoughts reenacted within the historian's mind. According to him the knowledge of an earlier era becomes possible with the historian projecting him (her) self into an earlier context. He was also the first historian to see the past events with a greater sense of complexity than as being easily understood and verifiable phenomenon that it was hitherto considered to be. With the coming of what is called the **Postmodernism** the mode of History writing has also been challenged. The postmodernists question the basic presumption of objectivity in history writing. They argue that objectivity in a political discourse like history becomes impossible because the position of the writer becomes aligned with power. Also the historian writes from a *point of view* that he cannot wish away. Some thinkers like Hayden White have taken an extreme position on this line of reasoning and have suggested a complete obliteration of the line between history and fiction. History is written by a historian and made available to the common people through history textbooks. Here what we look at is the power connotations of history- that it flows from authority to the common people. Also the traditional subject matter of history has been the conquests of the kings and the kingdoms. As a result the traditional history writing has essentially been about kings (replaced by powerful governments in recent times) written by court (state-approved) historians in the public chronicles (textbooks). When we consider these problems of history writing, other sources of writing history emerge. In recent times the school of **Subaltern studies** has provided a solution. The word "Subaltern" literally means subordinate or low-ranking. What these historians have done is attempted to rewrite the Indian history from the perspective of the common people. The power of the pen is shifted from the "court historian" to the traditionally less powerful common people. The historians under Subaltern studies also make use of unconventional sources like stories, *kissas*, folktales, songs etc. to uncover a past written by those in power. In recent time a sense of acute skepticism has come to play in our understanding of historical reconstructions which has abundantly got reflected in our literature. Salman Rushdie in presenting to us his story through Saleem Sinai of *Midnight's Children* consciously ascribes to him statements that are half-truths and at other times completely false.

This deliberate injecting of falsehood in the story is a strategy to evoke mistrust in the reader who is indirectly made aware of unreliability of all sources. These new authors have signalled death of the once existent sage-authors, the know-all reservoirs brimming with all the knowledge of all the world. What reads like a Shakespearean anachronism (the famous one being about chiming clocks in Greek times in Julius Caesar!) is confirmed in course as being deliberate and intended. The book uses the analogy of the perforated sheet where it acts as a screen for the doctor to examine the diseased body of a beautiful noble lady. The perforated sheet allows the

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doctor to examine the relevant body part only and shroud the rest in parda. The doctor as expected falls in love with the hidden lady (in fact her limited exposure adds to the fetish all the more!), but the whole is unfortunately not a sum total of parts as the doctor had imagined. The perforated sheet has since become a symbol of limited perception.

In the context of contemporary writing in English the pressing question is: what makes the author suggest a contest between history and personal experience? As mentioned earlier the credibility of public narrations has of late come under scrutiny. Whether it is Salman Rushdie treating history and religion with a celebratory irreverence or Mukul Kesavan attempting a revision of the Civil Disobedience Movement from the point of view of the Muslim Congressmen, or the scores of personal memoirs, giving a personal record of public events, a skeptical look at history has characterized great deal of Indian Writing in English for the past few decades. Most of these authors have been a part of the infamous history—they have either witnessed or been affected by events like partitioning of the country and consequently the writing of it. It is not unnatural then that they as witnesses to the discrepancy between lived events and recordings of them become natural critics to this entire enterprise. Some like Kesavan who is himself a historian claims to achieve through fiction that which history has denied to him. According to Jon Mee they are 'responses to debates currently circulating within Indian culture from this perspective the desire to return to Indian History might be seen as the expression of a generally critical attitude to the form of nation-state of has emerged since 1947.'

Amitav Ghosh is concerned with both these facets of history writing: its claim of objectivity and its alignment with position of powers. *The Shadow Line* tries to examine History especially the writing of Indian History and its treatment of certain events in Post-Independence India like Partition and Civil Strife. It is here that he shows the deceptive depiction of Partition by Indian History. Firstly the history writers justify partition by falsely creating difference between the two sides (refer: the upside-down house) and then completely ignoring the human suffering that it entailed. Similarly the depiction of Calcutta riots experienced by the narrator is not given any place in history inspite

of the influence it exerts on his psyche. By providing stories and anecdotes as a means of relating history he provides an alternative to the public history that emanates from the centers of power and aligns it to the people.

2. Title of the Novel

The title 'The Shadow Lines' is evocative of one of the major concerns of the novel: that of the creation of nations with boundaries that are both arbitrary and invented. This issue becomes more pertinent when viewed in the context of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent. That which, on surface, is projected as completely opposed to another is actually a part of it. The author uses the trope of house to explain this. As children Tha'mma and Mayadebi witness the family dispute between their father and his elder brother (Jethamoshai) that leads to the division of the house.

Tha'mma as a child in Dhaka house makes stories about the upside down house (the other half of the house occupied by the uncle's family) and narrates them to the younger sister. In the other half of the house, these stories talk of everything as being upside-down. The artificial constructedness of the 'otherness' of the house is very evident and gives to the keen reader a foretaste of a similar exercise in constructing the difference between the two sides of a partitioned nation. What is significant is that the two nations were united at one time but the course of history (or failure of vision) makes them two and for sustaining their separation this difference has to be invented. It is ironic therefore that Tha'mma who was herself a creator of that artificial difference cannot see through the strategy of the state. "But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are the people to know?" The case of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent has been very different because the state has been forced to create a difference where none existed and show the two nations as inherently opposed.

It is the fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets that one inhabits, can suddenly and without warning become as hostile

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as a desert in a flash flood. It is this that sets apart the thousand million people who inhabit the subcontinent from the rest of the world-not language, not food, not music-it is the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of the war between oneself and one's image in the mirror.

Perhaps this oblivion on Tha'mma's part is tantamount to a deliberate non-admission of facts that are deeply disturbing. The oblivion of Tha'mma therefore becomes her survival strategy.. Nationalism too gets redefined in various ways through experience. Whereas the *great historical project* of nationalism first undermines community (here the Bengali Community that is common between the East and the West Bengal.) to formulate nation, it then 'narrates the nation.' The theorist Bhaba sees this project as comprising of the creation of 'the narratives … that signify a sense of 'nationness': the…pleasures of one's hearth and the… terror of the space of the other.' This idea however in the context of the Indian subcontinent gets problematised because the *otherness* being talked of has to be created rather than merely alluded to. People in the newly formed nations of Pakistan and Bangladesh are prompted through narration 'language, signifiers, textuality, rhetoric' to create a difference where none exists. Therefore what the book looks at is the createion of artificial difference between two nations that are inherently one.

Another subtle manner in which the author exposes this strategy is by describing the experience of an Indian (Ila) outside India (London). While in London, she inhabits that space where the India-Pakistan-Bangladesh differentiation melts down. During their visit to London she takes Robi and the narrator out for dinner 'at my (Ila's) favourite Indian restaurant.' As it turns out the 'Indian place' that she has been talking about is a small Bangladeshi place in Clapham! A seemingly insignificant incident ridicules the intense feeling of difference that these two countries otherwise harbour and how these differences are reduced to a naught if viewed from a space that is outside the two. So these boundaries that are created due to political reasons seem tangible enough to be called *lines* but if analysed closely, fade away like *shadows.*

3. Structure of the Novel

Everyone lives in a story...because stories are all there are to live in. The structure of *The Shadow Lines* comprises of two important characteristics:

That of a non-linear structure and a digressive narrative. *The Shadow Lines* is a novel without a defined Beginning, Middle and an End, instead it relies on a loop-structure of a story- within a –story. This is in turn linked to the second characteristic of digressive narrative. This interferes with what is called the 'unity of theme and action' as a hallmark of good writing as perceived by the Western poetics. This novel is essentially told through stories. It is due to this fact that we can say that the narrator is more of a listener than speaker. His method of narration is in 'bringing together' available versions rather than telling new stories. Out of this coming together of varied and contradictory versions emerges a better version that is more representative and inclusive. It is without one definable speaker (see the note on history). Both these elements of an unnamed narrator and a non-linear progression are more characteristic of Indian than Western poetics. Indian works have also traditionally not used the Western cause-effect structures, the links in the stories are non-linear and so is their progression. The western ideal of a palpable beginnings, middle and end is not present in the Indian works. A story as seen in this novel is a form that is not moving towards a preconceived culmination but as being constituted of several voices, all of which serve to make it richer. The narrator tells the story from various vantage points in time and space. Most of the stories begin like jigsaw puzzles with a limited meaning but conclude with an intelligible pattern. The various parts of a jigsaw puzzle or the incomplete story are supplied by various characters. The narrator is important to the extent of bringing all of them together a task enormously important and without which in spite of their existence these versions at best remain partially meaningful. In order to evoke an insight their coming together is inevitable. The structure of the novel that brings together many stories is also important in that the ideas that seek a definition through this novel (like Nationalism, Citizenry, community etc.) are given a fuller representation through this source than the partial view given by history and the disruptive and radical one of anecdotes.

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The book has two sub-sections: *Going Away and Coming home*. Both phrases indicate the queer sense of home and homelessness that the Partition victims have experienced that allows them to dispense with a fixed point that signifies a point of departure.

4. Theme of Partition in the Novel

"At the origin of India and Pakistan lies the national trauma of Partition, a trauma that freezes fear into silence, and for which The Shadow Lines seeks to find a language, a process of mourning, and perhaps even a memorial." The year 1947 spelt for India a heightened consciousness of the very idea of a nation. Not only was freedom from the colonial rule ushered in and a long cherished desire of a free country made available to the Indians, it also meant that the arrival of freedom signalled a virtual dislocation for a big fraction of the population: The birth of the free nation was accompanied by excruciating labour pains of the event of Partition. Histories of both sides portray this event in passing as a misfortune that arose out of the power interests of the 'other' side. In the history textbooks the struggle for Independence is seen to have concluded successfully, it was hailed as a model of the practice of the new philosophy of *ahimsa*. It can however legitimately be called non-violent only if we chose to gloss over the very existence of the event of Partition that accompanied the midnight decree of freedom- the biggest migration of human population that the sub-continent or perhaps the world has ever witnessed. It entailed loss of human life on both sides. In its magnitude it was one of the most important events in the Indian history and it affected the life patterns of thousands of families who travelled in caravans, horses, carts and cattle from West Punjab and in homemade boats from East Bengal. How does history talk of these migrants? How does history justify this act of the state at that time? Urvashi Butalia in her book *The Other Side of Silence* says that the state has strangely made no memorials to mark this momentous event. However the memory of Partition has very well been preserved by the communities in the confines of their homes through stories and anecdotes told by the way of mouth and passed through one generation to the other. Of late this interest in the documentation of the private experience of Partition has been performed by our Literature. Indian Writing in English has seen a spurt in the publication of Partition related Literature. *The Shadow Lines* is, among other issues, a book about the Bengal Partition. The experiences of Tha'mma through the trope of the divided house (as discussed earlier) clearly bring out her side of the story about the event. The story of the old uncle *Jethamoshai* captures the poignant side of the human experience of Partition and of course the depiction of the penury and destitution of Tha'mma's poor relatives capture the economic effects of Partition.

5. Community and Communal Strife

The Shadow Lines takes up the issue of Partition (1947) and the author presents through it an elaborate critique of the whole idea of a nation as it emerged in the circumstances. **Community** as a condition prior to Partition is seen as an ideal state and the narratives that the community produces are seen as being more representative of their experience than history. The natural community in the Indian subcontinent across Punjab and Bengal got split into two nations following the call for Partition. What followed was the physical dislocation of 15 million people from the places that their communities had traditionally called home. Those who crossed over to the Indian side arrived landless, clueless and resourceless to be a part of the rejoicing in Delhi on the eve of country's Independence. The Partition had thus disrupted the existence of 'natural communities'. A classification about natural and interest oriented communities is used by Sudipta Kaviraj to draw up an elaborate case about the difference between *nation* and *community*. He draws heavily on the work of the sociologist Toennies to discuss two kinds of communities: gemeinschaften which is the primary, traditional group, and which according to Kaviraj 'one does not make an interest actuated decision to belong.' On the other hand is gesselschaften, similar to modern nations, which are based on the convergence of political and economic interests. The Partition necessitates the disruption of gemeinschaften embodied by the old communities in Bengal and Punjab in order to create gesselschaftens: India and Pakistan. Further, 'these imagined communities can place their boundaries in time and space anywhere they like.'…unlike the former which have 'naturally limited contours.' So whereas the former state reflects a cultural bonding, the latter is based on political interest. To these groups are also

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then linked their own forms of narration. Narratives, according to Kaviraj 'are always told from someone's point of view…they try to paint a picture of some kind of an ordered, intelligible, humane and habitable world…literally produce a world in which the self finds home.' The gemeinschaften, therefore has its own community specific narratives and gesselschaften acquires it in due course. Whereas the former lives in age old stories, shared in various forms by the community, the latter finds a home in Histories. Community also comes to us as a concept through the reading of the experience of Partition. Community, as it appears through the government documents gets reduced to numbers that bear the brunt of state policy. These communities are visualised by the state as characterised by one single characteristic-language or religion. These are the communities on paper and convenient as subjects for policy formulation. But 'real' communities lie outside the ambit of these documents and as Melville talks of places such as 'kokovoko, an island far away to the West and South' which is not 'down in any map because true places never are', these communities too are only lived, seldom represented. The Partition of India was based on the justification of communal tension between Hindus and Muslims but our literatures have presented to us far more complex designs of communities with composite structures that have for considerable time shared a common culture inspite of religious differences. In this regard Bhalla argues that there are hardly any chronicles, songs, kissas and *tamashas* in Punjab, which record a long history of irreconcilable hatred between Hindus and Muslims. What the Governments never addressed was that culture instead of religion could be an equally valid characteristic defining communities, that culture far predated religion as a constituent of a community, that it was absurd to lump together culturally alien Muslims of Bangladesh and Pakistan as one nation and force the East and West sides of Punjab and Bengal respectively to be declared a part of India. Subsequently the Nationalists construct the other side as a country politically, ethically and *inherently* opposed to itself.

The Partition of India in this sense was an important event because it cartographically relocated what were once closely existing natural communities and instead formulated an *imagined community* of the nation. The history of India being the narrative of the modern nation rather than the primordial (and now secondary) community told the tale of the nation and obliterated that of the society. Riots between communities as a characteristic 20th Century phenomenon figure in the book prominently. The author also focuses on how they are portrayed variedly by the newspapers and the author's imagination. Whereas in the author's imagination they have stood out as a single most important event of his childhood, in the newspapers and other sources they do not even merit a mention. The author looks for reasons that lead to this silence in portrayal of riots by the state. The reason, of course is not far to find: the difficulty in representing an enemy that arises from *within* rather than *without*. The new age stories (literature) therefore become the narrative of the communities and make up for the silence in history when it comes to the portrayal of events like partition and riots. It records what happened he partition victims and subsequently victims of the numerous civil strifes whose point of view always remains under represented because these incidents undermine the very *notion of a nation* that history purports to create. It is also ironic that post partition, people across the border share all their old stories but from a point completely separate histories. And as Ghosh points out the nature of this relationship is governed by … that indivisible sanity that binds people to each other Independently of their governments. And that prior, independent relationship is the natural enemy of government, for it is in the logic of the states that to exist at all they must claim the monopoly of all relationships between people. (230) It is shown how when the communities give way to nation their narration is taken over by a totalizing history. In *The Shadow Lines,* Tha'mma receives her ideas about the new nation that she comes to inhabit after Bangladesh becomes another country.

Some voices in the contemporary Indian Writing in English have studied the writing and historical justification of partition in this light. Historians have tried to read a communal angle into the event and tried to trace a genealogy of such events with a 'retrospective intelligibility' that leads to a known and expected end. It is interesting to note, therefore, in this light that

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while they highlighted stray incidents of communal violence in the pre-partition time to give a historical justification to the inevitable phenomenon of Partition, in *The Shadow Lines*, on the other hand riots, civilstrife and communal riots do not find expression in the official records. This happens because the same incidents, which at one time supported the political decisions will at the present only go on to, hamper its legitimacy. In both cases the community experience and its depiction suffers. The accounts of partition completely ignore the fact of the composite quality of relationships that existed between people of different religions and that there were other potent factors of their cohesion like a shared cultural ethos. *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh talks of such a definition of community in the village of Manomajra. Some of these books show the existence of an alternate religion with people of different faiths looking upon a common shrine (in this case a sandstone slab) as religious. Interestingly, this feature about close knit cohesive communities later gets transported to the imagined community of the state of otherwise riot-ravaged India.

6. Postcolonial Literature

As students of History we have all come across the term *Colonial*. We also know that the germs of modern day economic progress of the first world countries really lie in the movement called *Industrial Revolution*. With the coming of this movement in 17th century Europe, several fundamental changes were made in the means and modes of production. With the coming of mechanical support and subsequently industry the medieval economic model of feudalism was replaced by *Capitalism*. Capitalism was spurred on by the then pervasive ideology of *Utilitarianism* inspired by ideologues like Jeremy Bentham. The chief concern of this movement was "the greatest good of the greatest number." Not only was this 'goodness' solely material in nature, it also did away with all faith in morality and right action. Therefore to look for material benefit became the chief concern of those who held the means of production i.e. the capitalists.

The coming of Industry led to quick production of a large quantity of goods. To begin with this seemed like a welcome change from the earlier arduous methods of production that were both labour intensive and time consuming. However soon a new concern began to plague the capitalists: that of depleting home markets and lack of raw materials.

Simultaneously another development was taking place: the advancement of geography with the coming of sophisticated sea vessels and implements like magnetic compass. This meant that the Capitalists could not only get new places and markets to sell their mass produced goods but also find treasures of cheap raw materials. Thus began an unequal relationship between these two kinds of blocks of nations: one, mostly European, the beneficiary of Industrial Revolution looking for markets and raw materials and the other, belonging to Asia, Africa and America waiting to be exploited.

This exploitation that lasted over two centuries did not remain merely material in nature. It transformed itself to other forms: it became ideological, cultural and also spiritual. If we talk of India, the colonial exploitation on the economic front included a systematic destruction of the existing Indian Industry and the exploitation of its rich raw materials that included crops, minerals and metals. Dadabhai Naoroji, the first Indian to criticize this gross exploitation of India as a colony by the British said in this regard that Britain had acted like a "sponge" sucking out all that was valuable year after year with impunity and depositing the spoils on its shores. Gradually the ambition of the Raj increased and what they desired subsequently was conquering the colony also culturally and spiritually. It is in this regard that they imposed English as a method of instruction and also introduced 'the classics of English Literature' into Indian classrooms.

This total exploitation of India went on till the year 1947 when India attained freedom. Post World War II has seen many of these erstwhile colonies attain freedom partly as a result of sustained Popular Movements against foreign rule and partly because as a consequence of the economic ill effects of WWII most of these erstwhile colonies became incapable of supporting overseas rule.

Notes

For these countries in Asia, Africa and S.America, the experience of colonialism has become a major reference point in understanding their recent history. When we see this perception in the literature of these countries we study it as **Post-Colonial literature.** In their book *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989), Bill Ascroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin say that though historically Post-Colonial means "after colonisation", in literature it signifies "all the experience affected by the colonial process from the beginning of colonisation to the present day." John Theime, the editor of the famous *Arnold Anthology of Post-Colonial Literature* (1996) talks of two pivotal concerns of Post-colonialism:

(*i*) Interrogation of Euro centric conceptions of culture;

(*ii*) Interrogation of former canonical orthodoxies of "English Studies."

The methods, modes and means of analyzing information, perceiving life experiences and institutions have, under colonial influence always been affected by the notion of European superiority and native people's inferiority. With the coming of Post-colonialism this placement of Europe in the center as a model has ceased. The cultural systems and ethos of these new nations are now being analysed not with an outside European standard but by their own standard. It is like the locus of control has shifted from without to within. In India this talk of the change in the curriculum of English departments emerged and was first *appeased* by the introduction of a cursory paper on Commonwealth Literature. However the growing consensus on revising syllabus cannot be ignored for long. Recent years have seen a remarkable change in both the content and approach to the teaching of English in the entire country. The syllabii have not only seen an inclusion of more Indian writers writing in English but also that of Indian Writing in regional languages translated into English. Though in India we have not taken the radical route of "abolition of the English Department" as suggested by the famous Nigerian author Ngugi Wa Th'ongo, we have certainly considered rereading the prescribed English texts and the new Indian and Other World writings with a renewed sensibility by which we are no longer the subjects. Indian Writing in English today has to shake off the western influence it has been wearing since it was first introduced and has to begin asserting its credentials more genuinely.

7. Home/Homelessness

In the novel *The Shadow Lines* home is in an allegorical relationship with nation. Tha'mma talks of her upside-down house in Dhaka and the story of that house is in deed the story of partitioned India. As children living in a joint family in Dhaka, Tha'mma and her sister Mayadebi are witness to the feud between their father and his brother. Things come to such a pass that they think of dividing their house. This division is so tangible that an actual line is drawn in the middle of the house dividing everything including the commode. In this ludicrous detail the partition comes out for the reader as an event that was both irrational and avoidable. Another aspect of Partition of the house that is later applied to the nation is about the ideological division that follows this material division. Once the Partition has taken place, the other side of the house becomes inaccessible to everybody including the two girls, Tha'mma and Mayadebi.

Since Tha'mma is the elder one, she talks of the house as the **upside down house** in which everything is the opposite of how things naturally are. The two nations just like the two parts of a household were united at one time but the course of history (or failure of vision) divides them and for sustaining their separation the difference has to be created. These stories that Tha'mma creates to bring alive to her younger sister the situation of the other part of the house, are in spirit comparable to the modern version of fake national pride that is also likewise based on false stories of difference. Her decision to go to Dhaka, which is her erstwhile home in order to bring back her old sick uncle, is a very unsettling time for her. Routine activity of furnishing her personal details while finishing the documentation for her visa forms raise fundamental doubts about her identity. For the first time the sure shot and composed Tha'mma goes through pangs of some fundamentally disturbing interrogation. She wonders as to how the 'place of her birth had come to be messily at odds with her nationality'. She cannot resolve the chaos that surfaces in the patterns that are so essential to her identity. The book has two sub-sections:

Notes

Going Away and Coming home. Both phrases indicate the queer sense of home and homelessness that the Partition victims have experienced that allows them to dispense with a fixed point that signifies a point of departure.

1.6 Summary

- The novel follows the life of a young boy growing up in Calcutta and later on in Delhi and London. His family – the Datta Chaudharis - and the Prices in London are linked by the friendship between their respective patriarchs – Justice Datta Chaudhari and Lionel Tresawsen.
- The narrator adores Tridib because of his tremendous knowledge and his perspective of the incidents and places. Tha'mma thinks that Tridib is type of person who seems 'determined to waste his life in idle self-indulgence', one who refuses to use his family connections to establish a career. Unlike his grandmother, the narrator loves listening to Tridib. For the narrator, Tridib's lore is very different from the collection of facts and figures.
- The narrator is sexually attracted to Ila but his feelings are passive.
- He never expresses his feelings to her afraid to lose the relationship that exists between them. However one day he involuntarily shows his feelings when she was changing clothes in front of him being unaware of his feelings. She feels sorry for him.
- Tha'mma does not like Ila. 'Why do you always speak for that whore'- She doesn't like her grandson to support her. Tha'mma has a dreadful past and wants to reunite her family and goes to Dhaka to bring back her uncle. Tridib is in love with May and sacrificed his life to rescue her from mobs in the communal riots of 1963-64 in Dhaka.

Self-Assessment

1. Choose the correct options:

(*i*) The Shadow Lines given Sahitya Akademi Award for English in ..... .

(*a*) 1980 (*b*) 1981

(*c*) 1989 (*d*) 1990

(*ii*) The protagonist of a middle class boy ..... .

(*a*) Tridib (*b*) Ila

(*c*) May (*d*) Narrator

(*iii*) ..... is a good looking blande having a long hair.

(*a*) May (*b*) Tridib

(*c*) Nick (*d*) None of these

(*iv*) The Headmistress of girls school in Calcutta ..... .

(*a*) Ila (*b*) May

(*c*) Grandmother (*d*) None of these

1.7 Key-Words

1. Trauma : A deeply distressing or disturbing experience.
2. Protagonist : The leading character experience or a major character in a drama, movie, novel or other fictional text.

1.8 Review Questions

1. How is the novel "The Shadow Lines" both an example of and diversion from the *Bildungsroman* (novel of growth) tradition of novel?

Notes

2. What are Tha'mma's views on Nation and Nationalism? How do her experiences account for these? How are her views challenged in the novel?
3. How does the author use the trope of a divided feud-ridden house to discuss the issue of Partition of India?
4. According to the author "The Shadow Lines" was influenced by the 1984 Anti- Sikh riots. How does the book deal with the question of civil strife and rioting in Modern India? Discuss in detail the narrator's description of his experiences as a schoolboy caught in the 1964 Calcutta riots, their lasting influence on the narrator and also his subsequent questioning of their depiction in history?
5. Discuss the growth of the narrator's relationship with Ila from being a schoolboy in Calcutta to an adult in London.
6. How does the book question the writing of history? Discuss the portrayal of the Partition of India in history books and how in this regard "public chronicles" are challenged by "private chronicles"?
7. What are the "Shadow Lines" that the author talks about? How is the question of invented Nationhood esp. in relation with the Partition of India discussed in the book?
8. How does the non-linear structure of the book compliment its theme?
9. Discuss the relationship of the English family of the Prices and the Dutta-Chaudhary family of Bengal spanning three-generations.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (*i*) (*c*) (*ii*) (*d*) (*iii*) (*c*) (*iv*) (*c*)

1.9 Further Readings

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Notes

Unit 2: Amitav Ghosh; Shadow Lines: Detailed Study of Part—I (A Bird's Eye View)

CONTENTS

Objectives
Introduction
2.1 Shadow Lines—A Bird's Eye View
2.2 Themes
2.3 Summary
2.4 Key-Words
2.5 Review Questions
2.6 Further Readings

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Have a bird's eye view of the Shadow Lines.
- Discuss the novel Shadow Line.

Introduction

The Shadow Lines is a stunning novel—amusing, sad, wise and international in scope. It chronicles the story of two families, one in Calcutta the other in London from the outbreak of World War II to modern times. Inter-alia, The Shadow Lines is also a book about the prodigious imagination of its narrator who is the chronicler of the lives around him and presents the events with amazing insight, sometimes skipping from city to city in the same breath and recreating events that happened before he was born with marvelous accuracy and about the lines and borders that are being drawn world over to divide and isolate one man from the other.

2.1 Shadow Lines—A Bird's Eye View

The Shadow Lines among other things deals with the Narrator's growth from a tiny world, reverent of his mentor to a matured and grown up man of the same age as Tridib and in London too. So great is the influence of Tridib that he warily or unwarily copies him and toes his line. He does his Ph.D. on the textile trade between India and England in 19th century as Tridib did on Sena dynasty of Bengal. Their field remains the same viz. history.

Tridib, his guide, fires his imagination and instills a passionate zeal to learn to travel and take a flight into imagination without actually leaving the ground. Thus before Tridib left him forever he had nurtured the things taught by him so well that they became the corner stone of his itinerary. He had imagined everything so well and precisely that the whole world existed in right contours and forms in corner of his mind so that whenever he needed any information or recollect the past he just had to strain his brain and things would get going for him.

Traveling in his imagination with seriousness and precision handed him many a gift. He was a well-traveled and well-read man. The desire to read, analyze and reason had well developed in him. Whether it was spotting Prices house in London or India House or capturing Nick alive in his mind and growing with him in his thoughts for 17 long years he would never fail. He had learned to use his imagination pretty well and differed from Ila and his grandmother who were land-

Notes

locked and stagnated pools. Where Tha'mma could not foresee or imagine the border in its reality, Ila made a mess everywhere she went because of the lack of her power to anticipate, to imagine.

One evening when they were sitting out in the garden Tha'mma wanted to know whether she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane. When the Narrator's father laughed and said, why, did she really think the border was a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other, like it was in a school atlas, she was not so much offended as puzzled.

'No that wasn't what I meant, she said, Of course not. But surely there's something—trenches perhaps, or soliders, or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land, Don't they call it no-man's land?'

This is because of the two reasons, the first is her inability to imagine and the second is because of her traditional or conservative approach where she would rather like her things clearly chalked out and defined.

The grandmother thought this over for a while, and then she said: 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 a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without any body stopping us. What was it all for then—partition and all the killing and everything—if there isn't something in between?

The Narrator's father got a bit perplexed on this and did not know what his mother actually expected and told her that it was the modern world. The border did not exist on the frontiers rather it was right inside the airport. She would cross it when she would fill in all those forms about her nationality, place of birth etc.

The answer confounded her and she slumped into the chair. She had not known all these things neither did she expect them.

Painfully the novelist deseribes her inability to come to terms with partition and accept the fact that her place of birth was now a foreign city and she would have to go to the place instead of coming as she earlier used to say.

The narrator puts it very subtly. 'It was not till many years later that I realized it had suddenly occurred to her then that she would have to fill in Dhaka as her place of birth on that form, and that the prospect of this had worried her in the same way that dirty schoolbooks worried her because she liked things to be neat and in place—and at that moment she had not been able to quite understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality. If she happened to say she was going to teach me Bengali grammar for example, I would laugh and say: But Tha'mma, how can you teach me grammar? Eventually the phrase passed on to the whole family and became a part of its secret lore.'

Slowly and gradually, disenchantment of Tha'mma with the place across the border coverts into hideousness. After the post partition blues and the death of Tridib in one of such riots in Dhaka, which is also the sensational event of the novel, her perspective changes. Now she has aversion for the inhabitants of the other side of the border. She gives away the most cherished gift of her husband, a necklace that she was presented with in a foreign country and with which she had never parted.

'It was the first thing, he ever game me—in Rangoon, soon after we were married. They have wonderful rubies there. I couldn't bear to give it away. He wouldn't like it. I haven't taken if off once in these thirty-two years—not even when I had my gallbladder operation. They wanted me to take it off, but I made them sterilize it instead. I wasn't going to have my operation without it. It's become a part of me now', Tha'mma explains to the narrator.

And then one day in the 1965, more than one and a half years after her trip to Dhaka, she gave it away.

The narrator playfully asks her about her chain one day, 'Tha'mma! I shouted, what's happened to your chain? What have you done with it?

Notes

She turned to look at me then. 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. I wished I hadn't shut the door behind my back.

I gave it away, she said, her glazed, unfocused eyes alighting, not on me, but on a point on the wall above my head.

Why Tha'mma? I said. Why did you do that?

I gave it away, she screamed, I gave it to the fund for 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.

She becomes so frantic and desperate that the few drops of blood, which came out of her hand when she struck the radio in rage; she wants to donate it to the hospital so that it could be used for the solidiers.

Ila thought not as obstinate and impulsive as Tha'mma, is a bold and a free girl. She does not want to be tied to any one place or culture. She wishes to lead a free and unstrained life. She would not respect her uncle Roby when he restrains her from leading a kind of free life in a Calcuttan hotel as she used to see in other places of the world. She would snub at him and even entered a verbal duel with him over this in a hotel in Culcutta where she had gone with Roby and the narrator. She wanted to dance and when Roby refused she wanted to go with anybody who would dance with her. Roby objected to this saying,

'I can't dance, he said, raising his head to look at her. And even if I could, I wouldn't in a place like thus. I think you should sit down, for you're not going to dance either.

At first she was merely surprised.

I'm not going to dance? She said. Why not?

Because I won't let you, said Robi evenly.

You won't let me? She said. The muscles of her face went slowly rigid.

'You won't let me? She said. Why, who do you think you are? Robi folded his arms across his chest. It doesn't matter who I am, he said, I won't let you.

She turned to look at the narrators, her lips going thin and bloodless. Does he think, she asked him, that I'm one of his college freshers or something? Does he think because he's got a lot of muscles, he can stop me? Does he think I'm scared of a college bully? Well let's see him stop me.'

After that Ila gets up to take the hand of the businessman with whom she wanted to dance and Roby instantly puts him down with a knock of his. A brief ruckus is created in the hotel and he gives a quick word of apology to every body, pays up the bill quickly and moves out with others. Out side he says to Ila,

'You shouldn't have done what you did. You ought to know that, girls don't behave like that here.'

What the fuck do you mean? She spat at him. What do you mean 'girls'? I'll do what I bloody well want, when I want and where.

No you won't, he said. Not if I'm around. Girls don't behave like that here.

Why but? She screamed. Why fucking well not?

You can do what you like in England, he said. But here there are certain things you cannot do. That's our culture, that's how we live.

Then she waved to a taxi. It stopped and she darted into it, rolled down the window, and shouted: Do you see now why I've chosen to live in London? Do you see? It's only because I want to be free.

Free of what? The narrator said.

Free of you! She shouted back. Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you.'

But she has to pay a price for this kind of life that she leads. She is a failure both at home and outside. She suffers from racial discrimination outside India but still sings praises of those lands. Nothing that happens in India is as great as that happens in London even if it is mundane, trivial

Notes

or banal. 'We could never create history', she feels. But she is blithely ignorant of the enormity of Indian culture or even the little sense of being an India.

She further avers about the westerners and some western things great in her eyes:

'At least they knew they were a part of the most important events of their time—the war and fascism, all the things you read about today in history books, That's why there's a kind of heroism even in their pointless deaths; that's why they're remembered and that's why you've led us here. You wouldn't understand the exhilaration of events like that—nothing really important ever happens where you are.'

Tridib in the novel acts as a link between India and England as he invariably figures in one place or the other. He is a character of a different hue. Blessed though with an impressive personality, paradoxically he is a carefree man who does a little for a good or proper settlement in life. Tha'mma is critical of him because of this. But the fact remains that he is a darling of many.

He wins the hand of a foreign Memshaib in his nonsensical, carefree and innocent manner. Though in one of the letters he gives an erotic description of a couple in a wartime bomb devasted London theatre, there is no evil growing in his mind.

He remains a powerful factor and is an advocate of the frontier free world where one has as much of a chance to live in harmony and love as another. And his million-dollar story about a man in love with the woman across the seas become immortal in the pages of The Shadow Lones.

'Ah, said Tridib. That's the trick, you see. It happened everywhere, wherever you wish it. It was an old story, the best story in Europe, told when Europe was a better place, a place without borders and countries; it was a German story in what we call Germany, Nordic in the north, French in France, Welsh in Wales, Cornish in Cornwall: it was the story of a hero called Tristan, a very sad story, about a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman-across-the-seas....'

History has proved this time and again. Kargil united India after a long lull. The people were swept by a feeling of nationalism and everybody came forward to help the hardy soldiers in kargil in any way he could.

Did u know? The Shadow Lines gets across one fact of life very well that external threat unites the people. The personal, social and political differences sink in the face of a national tragedy or when the existence is at stake.

In the past when the tyranny and operation of the British became too much, the mighty empire was challenged with an outbreak of the revolt of 1857 and partition of Bengal united the whole India in the same way.

In the novel, Mayadebi experiences the same thing when she goes to London for a brief period during 1940s on the eve of her husband's posting there. She narrates her experience. The couple of months she had spent in London had been so exciting-the atmosphere had changed so dramatically. People were becoming friendlier, in the shops, on the streets, she couldn't help noticing. Everyone had become so much nicer. Often when she and Tridib were out walking, people would pat him on the head and stop to have a little chat with her; the shopkeepers would ask her where and how her husband was, and when was to have his operation. But it wasn't just-everyone was being friendly with everyone else. There was a kind of exhilaration in the air.

Mayadebi says that she had been lucky. She had been able to watch England coming alive and she would have missed that fact if she had not been there.

Tresawsen adds saying, 'People don't believe me, but 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.

The supporters of universal civilization assert that the unification of the earth's inhabitants is neither a remote utopian vision nor, ultimately, a matter of choice. It constitutes the next inescapable

Notes

stage in the process of social evolution, a stage towards which all the experience of past and present is impelling us. Until this issue is acknowledged and addressed none of the ills afflicting our planet will find solutions, because all the essential challenges of the age we have entered are global and universal, not particular or regional. So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth. The Shadow Lines wishes to establish such orders. How far is this attainable is yet to be seen but it certainly wants to do away with the petty differences that are killing the mankind everywhere. Whether it is Tridib, the narrator, Roby or Tha'mma—they are all disillusioned and disappointed by these differences which are a source of many a trouble afflicting the humankind. Roby cannot get over the trauma of Trdib's death and this haunts him like a nightmare. He thinks that he will be able to forget it but it comes back to him no matter how hard he tries, wherever he goes. He says,

'I've never been able to rid myself of that dream ever since it first happened. When I was a child I used to pray that it would go away: if it had, there would have been nothing else really to remind me of that day. But it wouldn't go; it stayed. I used to think: if only that dream would go away, I would be like other people; I would be free. I would have given anything to be free of that memory.

'Free', he said laughing.

And then he also muses on the subversive and the secessionist tendencies of some of the misguided people. So far as freedom is concerned, turning away from a piece of land or carving out a new state does not make the person free. The whole thing is a mirage.

'.....and then I think to myself why don't they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every little place a new name? What would it change? It's a mirage; the whole thing is a mirage. How can anyone divide a memory? If freedom were possible, surely Tridib's death would have set me free. And yet, all it takes to set my hand shaking like a leaf, fifteen years later, thousands of miles away at the other end of another continent, is a chance remark by a waiter in a restaurant.'

Tridib had always been against these lines and had been a visionary. He had gone for the world without these lines. His tragic end marks a very poignant part of the story and increases an aversion for the mind troubling bickerings and bizarre human nature. Though man is a social animal and craves for the company he cannot stay in peace with them either.

The narrator has also done a lot of work on these lines and wondered about the strange calculus they present. His work on Bartholomew's Atlas where he has measured the distances between various countries and the conclusion he reaches is quite contrary.

2.2 Themes

The Shadow Lines hosts a number of themes. The first and foremost being that it is an attempt to draw the attention of the world to do away with borders that divide the people. Humanity after all is the same everywhere and any attempt to create differences is not only hazardous but also futile. There is nothing on earth that can divide a memory. Many lines and borders may be drawn but it can never set people free of their reminiscences, free of their associations, free of the love and a sense of belonging for their place of birth. The second thing it considers is how many of these lines can be drawn or divisions made. It is all a mirage. The world cannot be divided into innumerable small stages to satisfy the urge of the people to give their frantic sense of nationalism a political entity and a name. In Indian context, first it was the creation of Pakistan then the demand arose for Punjab, the North East and then Kashmir. Partition or secession is no solution. It may on the other hand trigger never ending hostilities and violence. There can be no better example than India.

For Dutta Choudarys the borders have already stopped existing. They frequent from one country to another and are quite at home and comfortable in other states. For Sahib and family India, London or Dhaka; it's all the same. He is as comfortable there as he is in India.

For Ila, frontiers of nations have reduced to airport longes. Like her father she is also a frequent visitor of the countries. But besides territorial borders, she does not recognize cultural borders as well which as the novel reveals may be fatel.

Notes

Tridib is another character that projects the theme of universal brotherhood and amity. His ideal story is about a time when Europe was a better place, a place without borders and countries—, a man without a country who fell in love with a woman across the seas. In his powerful imagination there exist lots of countries and people but no frontiers.

The narrator believes in the reality of space, that the distance separates but is sadly mistaken. He felt that the two pieces of land would slip away from each other like the tectonic plates of Gondwanaland but is amazed to find that there had never been a movement in the four-thousand-year-old history of that map when the places they knew as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines—so closely that he (narrator) in Calcutta had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other locked into an irreversible symmetry of the line that was to set them free-their looking glass borders. These border that are drawn are mere shadow lines according to the author, which often play a role opposite to what they are actually meant to. They reflect not the differences but the similarities and interdependence.

There are a good number of instances, which show a good fusion of language, culture and countries to bring home the point that the earth after all is like one country. But at the same time The Shadow Lines is also a warning for the cultureless identity. Ila is a burning example.

The views have also been expressed on the concept of nationalism that is gaining ground in today's world. The author has held the extreme form of nationalism responsible for many a problem these days. The separalist and secessionist tendencies are the outcome of it. Love of country, passion inspired nationalism and intoxication of patriotism cannot but lead to jingoism. The novel ignores the existence of nationalism. Tha'mma is ridiculed as 'a still surviving specimen of fossilized nationalism'.

Time and distance are taken to be shadows. The novel makes a smooth transition from present to the past and from past to the future without causing any friction. The novel highlights the reality of the frictions people create around their lives.

Amongst other things, The Shadow Lines is a fine blend of amusement, wisdom, pathos and sentimentality. Despite being Indian in origin it is international in scope. The novel is not written sequentlially and it is one of its chief features. It keeps moving back and forth and happens at many places at one and the same time. Time and distance are the challenges to be overcome in the novel.

The Shadow Lines also talks about the havoc and the terror created by the riots. Despite the orgy of voicence, bloodshed and merciless killing, they have a transient existence. They are washed out from the public memory before long. The narrator is at a loss to know that his friend, Malik at Delhi does not remember anything about the riots that took place in Calcutta and Dhaka almost the same time in which many where killed including his role model Tridib and neither do the newspaper carry and significant report on it or attach much importance.

Characters in the novel intermingle not as members of a distinct culture but as complex individuals in a world where geographic boundaries have truly becomes the shadow lines. These boundaries are like a mirror that seem to reflect not their differences but their similarities. May Price falls in love with Tridib and Nick marries Ila? The Prices are in good relationship with Dutta Choudary's family and this friendship spans over three generations. The British and the Indians remained locked for three hundred years in 'ruler and the ruled' relationship. The cultural differences do exist but it is not that people cannot live in harmony.

Removal of the boundaries or the borders so that the earth becomes but one country and mankind its citizen or to talk in more practical terms, formation of a world Government or at least peaceful co-existence without losing the cultural identity seems to be the message of the novel.

The Shadow Lines sparks off a debate between tradition and modernity. Good fences make good neigbhours and limitations or fences are the touchstone of sanity is put under a test. The characters by whom the two concepts are conveyed are strong ones. Both are the radical women. One is rooted in tradition the other in modernity. On one hand we Tha'mma, a radical, and nationalist rooted in tradition but despised and mugged at invariably for nurturing primitive or supposedly

Notes

orthodoxed views in the context of the modern day scenario. The author is not very keen to buy her theory of nationalism and tradition. Ila represents to a great extent the modern cosmopolitan world, and is a free high flying girl, a girl without barriers, hurdles and stops. The borders have long seized to exist for her. But quite painfully she suffers the brunt of not belonging to any one territory, one culture and one identity. Where then lies the scope for universal civilization needs more explanation and no doubt it, too, may suffer from limitations. The Shadow Lines is therefore not a solution to modern diaspora but is certainly an attempt to make an appeal to the think tanks of the world; leaders and intellectuals to spare a thought on the philosophy of the novel; to do some hard thinking and put some sense and sanity into he minds of the people.

The Shadow Lines besides dealing with some serious themes is also a picturesque ovel. It deals with crowded, shaby and traffic-torn Calcutta with road side vendors and petty shopkeepers to picturesque and clean London; from traditional matriarchs to liberal and friendly Prices; giving snippets of was torn Germany and England. It captures the swining moods, whims and fancies of the people of scenic Kashmir and its inhabitants-innocent and pure.

It is the people at the lower level who get carried away by the emotions and indulge in what should not be done. Political bosses would still be all smiles and interact with warmth and courtesy with their counterparts while their respective side would be burning with hatred and vengeance. The aftermath affects these people the most. They become the playthings of the one in power, of religious zealots. It has been the sad experience of humanity that the religious passions are fanned more strongly than any other things. In these aspects The shadow lines is the novel of realism. It has message it wanted. The rest is for the receipients to decide and act.

So far as removing the boundaries and meaning of nationalism is concerned I personally don't quite agree with the opinion expressed in the novel. To take the universal civilization, world government etc. is far fetched or at least is very distant dream.

Customs and traditions by which man lives and proclaims his identity are rooted in culture. Culture is identifiable with territory and is evolved over the years. Culture demarcates one person from the other and territory one country from the other. Their norms, practices, beliefs are different from the ret and are likely to continue or persist. The Dutta Rai Choudarys in Dhaka divided and got separated after one generation. The property was divided and a line passed through bisecting the nameplate and an old commode. They were lawyers and wanted the division and handing over the property in lawyer like precision. This has a touch of India's real past. All Government property including tables, chairs, other office furniture and fans were counted and property accounted for the clear division.

I believe nationalism in itself is not to blame, if anybody is to blame then it is people for their material dream and their desire for power and rule. Any way, it has been a tremendous and commendable on part of Ghosh to make an attempt to bring the world in harmony and cordial relationship.

The novel highlights the two polarities of human nature. While there can be people on whom sense prevails and they mould palpably volatile situation to their control, there just may be another section which would make a mess of it and the human blood so spilled would shine in the flickering flames of the torched houses. Mu-I-Mubarak is just the kind of incident, which establishes the above fact.

This incident establishes ghat the riots, insurgence, unrest or mutual hatred is all the result of how you take up the situation and interpret it. If people take the brotherly stand and work in a secular way there is no reason to vie for each other's blood. Man gets carried away by his emotions if he does not exercise his reason and follow a little restraint. Mu-I-Mubarak incident clearly establishes this. On one hand it shows how the people of a particular area remained free of any communal brutality and butchery, which humanity usually has to undergo during such moments and how on the other hand the places which had nothing to do with it got involved and brought about the tragedy in so many lives.

On 27th December 1963, the relic disappeared from the mosque. There was an eerie calm as the news spread and then huge black flag demonstrations, marches of thousands of men women and children took place. The property was torched and destroyed but there was one special thing

Notes

about it that the whole episode did not report of the single loss of life. Thousands of people took part in demonstrations but they comprised Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Buddhists et al. A remarkable unity was displayed.

In Pakistan also there were meetings and demonstrations in both wings of the country. It was declared that the theft of the relic was an attack upon the identity of the Muslim. Karachi observed 31st December as a 'Black Day' and soon other cities followed the suit.

Later when the relic was recovered there was rejoicing all over Kashmir but while the people were dancing on the streets and organizing thanks giving meetings in Kashmir, a procession marching against the disappearance of the relic turned violent in Dhaka. A couple of lives were lost and properties of Hindus were put to fire. Over the next few days the riots spread outwards from Khulna into the neighbouring towns. Hindu refugees began to pour over the border into India. Soon Calcutta also erupted and mobs went rampaging through the city killing Muslims and burning and looting their shops and houses.

Once the riots started in Khulna the government of East Pakistan lost no time in sending the army there to put down the 'disturbances'. But it was already too late. One of the headlines of 7th January read: Fourteen die in frenzy off Khulna.

Over the next few days the riots spread outwards from Khulna into the neighboring towns and districts and towards Dhaka. Soon Hindu refugees began to pour over the border into India, in trains and on foot. The Pakistani government provided these trains with armed guards and appeared to have done with it could to protect them. At some places on the border the trains were stopped by mobs, some of which were heard to chant the slogans 'Kashmir Day zindabad' (perhaps at that very moment, the crowds in Kashmir were shouting 'Central intelligence zindabad'). But there did not appear to have been any serious attacks on the trains. The towns and cities of East Pakistan were now in the grip of a 'frenzy' of looting, killing and burning.

In Calcutta rumours were in the air—especially that familiar old rumour, the harbinger of every serious riot—that the trains from Pakistan were arriving packed with corpses. A few Calcutta dailies printed pictures of weeping, stranded Hindu refugees, along with a few lurid accounts of the events in the East. On 8th and 9th January, with refugees still pouring in, rumours began to flow like floodwaters through the city and angry crowds began to gather at the stations.

And so, the vents followed their own grotesque logic, and on 10th January, the day the cricket Test began in Madras, Calcutta erupted. Mobs went rampaging through the city, killing Muslims, and burning and looting their shops and houses.

The police opened fire on mobs in several places and a dusk to-dawn curfew was imposed on part of the city.

'Stray incidents' of arson and looting continued for a few days, in Dhaka as well as Calcutta, despite the presence of the two armies. It took about a week before the papers could declare that 'normalcy' had been 'restored'.

There are no reliable estimates of how many people were killed in the riots of 1964. The number could stretch from several hundred to several thousand; at any rate not very many less than were killed in the war of 1962.

It is evident from the newspapers that once the riots started responsible opinion in both India and East Pakistan reacted with an identical sense of horror and outrage. The University communities of both Dhaka and Calcutta took the initiative in doing relief work and organizing peace marches and newspapers on both sides of the border did some fine, humane pieces of reporting. As always there were innumerable cases of Muslims in East Pakistan giving shelter to Hindus, often at the cost of their own lives, and equally, in India, of Hindus sheltering Muslims. But they were ordinary people, soon forgotten—not for them any Martyr's Memorials or Eternal Flames.

The two governments levelled a series of symmetrical accusations. None of the two seemed to own up the responsibility for it. They wanted to wash their hands off the affair by blaming it on the other. On 7th January a spokesman of the External Affairs Ministry in New Delhi declared that the situation of 'lawlessness' in East Pakistan was an 'inevitable consequence of the incitement

Notes

and provocative statements' made by Pakistani leaders and the Pakistani press. A few days later the External Affairs Ministry was informed of the Pakistani government's view that the communal incidents in East Pakistan were being played up by the Indian Press in order to 'divert the people's attention from the serious happenings in Kashmir'. But even more curiously, within a few days an almost congratulatory note entered into the exchanges between the ministries as they reviewed their respective successes in quelling the disturbances. For a while the Presidents of the two countries even seriously considered assuring a joint appeal for communal harmony. But soon enough, that plan went the way of all good intentions in the subcontinent, and the memory of the riots vanished into the usual cloud of rhetorical exchanges.

They have no use for memories of riots.

By the end of January 1964 the riots had faded away from the pages of the newspapers, disappeared from the collective imagination of 'responsible opinion', vanished, without leaving a trace in the histories and bookshelves. They had dropped out of memory into the crater of a volcano of silence.

The narrator's tryst with the redemptive mystery takes place in London a day before he has to leave it after almost a year. He has to fly back to India and goes to meet May. She spared the narrator of the courage and the tedious task of asking her the manner of Tridib's death. She narrated the whole sequence of events from the place they left the old man's house. There was already disturbance in the air and when they were on their way home, their car was stopped by a mob. They broke the windscreen and injured the driver. When the security man fired a shot at them, they fell back for a moment but then they spotted the old man coming on the rickshaw with Khalil driving it. The mob fell on them. Tha'mma forgetting about the old man shouted at the driver to drive away but May Price shouted back at her. In that moment of death and devastation, the old woman appeared to her as a cowardly and impotent creature. She threw open the door of the car and ran after them. Tridib shouted her name and lost no time to run after her and soon caught up with her and pushed her. May thought that he had come to pull her back but he instead moved and done to death with the other two. Soon the crowd melted away into the narrow lanes. When May Price reached the spot she found three bodies. They had cut Khalil's stomach open. The old's man head was chopped off and Tridib's throat was cut from ear to ear.

After narrating the tale, there was a pause and she and the narrator finished the ice cream and he thanked her for the nice dinner. He rose to go. When he finally took her leave she was in the kitchen. There was a note in her voice that made him wonder. He stepped into the kitchen and touched her arm. Her face was wet with tears.

'Don't go', she said. 'Please; I don't want to be along I am afraid.'

The narrator grasped her shoulder then, and she learnt her head against his chest so that he could feel her face wet against his shirt. He stroked her hair, once, twice, and then afraid of frightening her as he'd done once before. He tried to step back. She held him for an instant and then she let go and straightened up.

'Do you think I killed him?' She said. Then she continued, 'I used to think so too, 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. I was safe you see I could have gone right into the mob, and they wouldn't have touched me, an English Memshaib, 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.'

After that, the narrator stays at her place and they ley in each other's arm quietly in the night. He was happy and grateful for she had given him the final redemptive mystery.

Self-Assessment

1. Choose the correct options:

(*i*) Who wanted to see the border between India and East Pakistan?

(*a*) Tha'mma (*b*) Tridib

(*c*) May (*d*) None of these

Notes

(*ii*) Who asks Tha'mma for her chain ..... .

(*a*) May (*b*) Tridib

(*c*) Nick (*d*) The Narrator

(*iii*) ..... is obstinate and impulsive.

(*a*) Tha'mma (*b*) May

(*c*) The Narrator (*d*) None of these

(*iv*) The mighty empire was challenged with an outbreak of the revolt of ..... .

(*a*) 1856 (*b*) 1857

(*c*) 1847 (*d*) None of these

2.3 Summary

- ***The Shadow Lines*** is a stunning novel—amusing, sad, wise and international in scope. It chronicles the story of two families, one in Calcutta the other in London from the outbreak of World War II to modern times.
- The Shadow Lines among other things deals with the Narrator's growth from a tiny world, reverent of his menotor to a matured and grown up man of the same age as Tridib and in London too. So great is the influence of Tridib that he warily or unwarily copies him and toes his line. He does his Ph.D. on the textile trade between India and England in 19th century as Tridib did on Sena dynasty of Bengal. Their field remains the same viz. history.
- The Shadow Lines hosts a number of themes. The first and foremost being that it is an attempt to draw the attention of the world to do away with borders that divide the people. Humanity after all is the same everywhere and any attempt to create differences is not only hazardous but also futile. There is nothing on earth that can divide a memory. Many lines and borders may be drawn but it can never set people free of their reminiscences, free of their associations, free of the love and a sense of belonging for their place of birth. The second thing it considers is how many of these lines can be drawn or divisions made. It is all a mirage. The world cannot be divided into innumerable small stages to satisfy the urge of the people to give their frantic sense of nationalism a political entity and a name. In Indian context, first it was the creation of Pakistan then the demand arose for Punjab, the North East and then Kashmir. Partition or secession is no solution. It may on the other hand trigger never ending hostilities and violence. There can be no better example than India.
- The narrator believes in the reality of space, that the distance separates but is sadly mistaken. He felt that the two pieces of land would slip away from each other like the tectonic plates of Gondwanaland but is amazed to find that there had never been a movement in the four-thousand-year-old history of that map when the places they knew as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines—so closely that he (narrator) in Calcutta had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other locked into an irreversible symmetry of the line that was to set them free-their looking glass borders. These border that are drawn are mere shadow lines according to the author, which often play a role opposite to what they are actually meant to. They reflect not the differences but the similarities and interdependence.
- Characters in the novel intermingle not as members of a distinct culture but as complex individuals in a world where geographic boundaries have truly becomes the shadow lines. These boundaries are like a mirror that seem to reflect not their differences but their similarities. May Price falls in love with Tridib and Nick marries Ila? The Prices are in good relationship with Dutta Choudary's family and this friendship spans over three generations. The British and the Indians remained locked for three hundred years in 'ruler and the ruled' relationship. The cultural differences do exist but it is not that people cannot live in harmony.
- The Shadow Lines besides dealing with some serious themes is also a picturesque ovel. It deals with crowded, shaby and traffic-torn Calcutta with road side vendors and petty

Notes

shopkeepers to picturesque and clean London; from traditional matriarchs to liberal and friendly Prices; giving snippets of was torn Germany and England. It captures the swining moods, whims and fancies of the people of scenic Kashmir and its inhabitants-innocent and pure.

- The novel highlights the two polarities of human nature. While there can be people on whom sense prevails and they mould palpably volatile situation to their control, there just may be another section which would make a mess of it and the human blood so spilled would shine in the flickering flames of the torched houses. Mu-I-Mubarak is just the kind of incident, which establishes the above fact.

2.4 Key-Words

1. Warily : Taught to be wary of strangers.
2. Trenches : A deep furrow, ditch or cut.

2.5 Review Questions

1. Who is Tridib's love-across-the sea? Discuss the relationship between Tridib and May.
2. Discuss Ila as a typical example of the cosmopolitan, travelling diasporic. Also highlight her experiences, including that of marrying Nick, which bring out her troubled racial and cultural identity?

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (*i*) (*a*) (*ii*) (*d*) (*iii*) (*a*) (*iv*) (*b*)

2.6 Further Readings

1. Bagchi, Nivedita. "The Process of Validation in Relation to Materiality and Historical Reconstruction in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 39:1 (Spring 1993). pp. 187-202.
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3. Dhawan, R.K. (ed.). 1999. *The Novels of Amitav Ghosh*, New Delhi: Prestige Books. James, Louis and Jan Shepherd. "Shadow Lines: Cross Cultural Perspectives in the Fiction of Amitav Ghosh." *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* (Dijon, France) 14:1 (Autumn, 1991): pp. 28-32.
4. The Oxford UP (India) – Delhi: Oxford UP, 1995 – edition contains 4 articles: Kaul, AN. "A Reading of *The Shadow Lines*." pp. 299-309.
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6. Roy, A. 2000. 'Microstoria: Indian Nationalism's "Little Stories" in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*,' *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 35:2 (2000), pp. 35-49.
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Notes

Unit 3: Amitav Ghosh—Shadow Lines: Detailed Study—II (Plot and Criticisms)

CONTENTS

Objectives
Introduction
3.1 Plot
3.2 Novelist's Criticism and Philosophy
3.3 The Shadow Lines—A Critique
3.4 Summary
3.5 Key-Words
3.6 Review Questions
3.7 Further Readings

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Understand—the Plot of Shadow Lines.
- Discuss the Novelist's Criticism and Philosophy.

Introduction

The novel is primarily a tale and as such it must be strong in the story interest. It must provide amusement for the leisure hour and a welcome relief from the strain of practical affairs. It must be gripping in its interest. Any novel, which provides wholesome and stimulant refreshment, is fully justified, but to be really great it must deal not with sheer trifling, which lie upon the surface of life, but with passions, and conflicts and problems, which constitute the very quality of life. It must have greatness of subject and universality of appeal. It does not mean that the subject chosen must be from high life, as the simplest story of the humblest people may also be as appealing as the story of kings or princes.

1. A good plot that deals with events and actions.
2. The characters i.e. men and women who carry out its action and to whom things happen.
3. Dialogue, that is, the conversation of the characters.
4. Scene and time of action i.e. the place and time where the action proceeds and the actors play their parts. It may be some limited region or its action may span large number of places, cities sometimes even countries.
5. Its treatment of life and its problems should be realistic. Thus, it is realism, which distinguishes it from the earlier prose romances. The novel does not provide escape from life and its problems, but rather a better understanding of them. It also reflects the very spirit of the age in which it is written.
6. It demonstrates the author's views of life and of some of the problems of life. It thus gives the author's criticism of life or his philosophy of it.

Notes

3.1 Plot

The novel deals with events and actions and things, which are suffered and done, and this is what that constitutes the plot. Plot is the basic framework of any piece of writing around which the story is woven. The plot may also be defined as a systematic organization and arrangement of incidents. A good plot is skilfully constructed and avoids gaps and inconsistencies. The events when proceed logically and spontaneously aid the plot to be good. The novelist's method of narration often makes a tedious plot also interesting.

A good plot grips the attention and the interest of the reader while a loose plot wavers the interest. A compact, symmetrical and a well worked out plot gives aesthetic pleasure.

Credibility of authenticity is another quality of a good plot. It should seem to move naturally and be free from any touch of artificiality.

Plot may be simple or compound. A simple plot comprises one story and compound has two or more stories in combination. A compound plot to be successful should have the unity of the stories, that is, they should be wrought harmoniously together. If this element of judicious blend of the story lines were missing, then it would become loose which will be technically imperfect. Thackeray's Vanity Fair is an example of a loose plot.

A loose plot is the story of detached incidents or episodes having little logical connection with each other. Some unity that is there is provided by the personality of the hero who binds the scattered elements together.

Dialogue

The conversation of these characters comprises the third element of the novel viz. dialogue. It is often so closely connected with the characterization that it appears to be a fundamental part of it.

In the first place it should always constitute an organic or natural element in the story, that is, it should really contribute, directly or indirectly, either to he movement of the plot or to the exposition or the explanation of the characters in their relations with it. Irrelevant conversations, however smart or witty, cause aberration and should therefore be avoided. They break the fundamental law of unity. Examples of such contravention can be found in plenty in the discussions on society, politics, art and literature, which fill many pages in the novels of many authors.

Setting

The time and place of action in the novel is called setting. It includes the entire background of the story—the manners, customs, ways of life the natural background or the environment.

Thus there are novels of the sea and of military life; of the middle classes, the upper classes, the lower classes; of industrial life, commercial life, artistic life, clerical life; and so on. Commonly the local type of characters are presented amidst their local or normal surroundings but often the novelist changes the background or transports his characters to different environment that becomes the novel's place of happenings and hence its setting. Setting also includes the portrayal of some special classes, social groups and places.

3.2 Novelist's Criticism and Philosophy

The fifth element of the novel is the writer's criticism, interpretation or philosophy of life. Every novel before being written lies in the conceptualized form in the novelist mind. Since novel is concerned directly with life; with the ephemeral beings—men and women, their relationships, their passions, feelings and reactions, their joys and sorrows, highs and lows of life, the novelist's comments or suggestions or his experiences invariably come into the novel which are defined as his criticism, interpretation or philosophy of life.

Notes

It goes without saying that the great novelists of the world have also been great thinkers and observers of life. Therefore, their novels are the classic examples of some fine work done on the understanding and appreciation of the problems plaguing the human beings and life in general. Therefore, it is impossible for the novel not to reflect his thinking and his criticism of it.

3.3 The Shadow Lines—A Critique

The Shadow Lines began to be written after the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi in the year 1984. The riots and the general massacre that began in Delhi and followed in other cities have an oblique bearing on the novel. The undertones of political vendetta are pervasive in the novel and can be felt when the efficacy of nationalism is questioned in today's context.

The Shadow Lines raises a few very important questions against the backdrop of emergence of increasing city-states everywhere and its demarcation and delineation on the maps. These shadow lines that are drawn cannot divide a memory or experience as Tha'mma and her old uncle believe and so do many others. The narrator's grandmother has got great affinity for Dhaka and her uncle who is ninety years old is staying there even after the partition and is reluctant to come to India. He lived with a Muslim family whom he had given shelter in his house during the partition. He is being looked after by the same family and he refuses to move away from this place. He says that if he moves out of his native place and transfers to Calcutta and they decide to draw a line once again then where would he go, having spent all his life in united India and being so enmeshed in Bengali culture where in the past Hindus, Muslims and Bengalis spoke the same language, shared the same culture and sprang from the same racial stock, and on the floor in a certain Bengali manner and celebrated their own Bengali new year on 15th April. Rabindra Nath Tagore was held in high esteem by one and all. He was born there, had spent his life there and would die there only. The same was the reaction of the narrator's grandmother also who is a staunch nationalist. She vents the similar feelings. Back in History in 1905, Lord Curzon, one of the able viceroys to rule India, tried to split Bengal into two halves on the plea of better administration and management. He tried to take advantage of the religious gulf between the two major communities but his efforts ended in failure in 1911 when the Bengalis irrespective of their religions got together and a bloody revolt proved that Bengalis were more prone to nationalist sentiments than to religious passions. Tha'mma wanted to visit her old house in Dhaka and actually went there with Tridib and May where she met her ninety-year-old uncle being attended by Khalil—the rickshaw driver and his family. She was quite surprised to find that her uncle who would even avoid the shadow of a Muslim while eating was being fed by a Muslim family. It is here that Tridib, he and Khalil become the victims of the riot.

However, the cold-blooded killing of Tridib in front of her eyes changes her perception. She too becomes a victim of aversion for those Pakistanis. Indians [undivided] who lived side by side for generations had suddenly turned on each other in a frenzy of killing. Troubled by the death of Tridib in Dhaka riots, she gives away her only gold chain to the war fund of 1965, 'For your sake; for your freedom', she tells her grandson, 'we have to kill them before they kill us; we have to wipe them out.' She takes comfort in the organized propriety of war now. We are fighting them properly at last, she says, with tanks and guns and bombs. Tha'mma is a staunch nationalist and British imperialism has made her senses sharp and keen and forged the theme of nationhood and the formation of Indian nation state. She tells him the story of her youthful days of college in 1920s when Indians were fighting the British tooth and nail for the freedom and there were a few militant revolutionary societies operating secretly in Bengal. One of her classmates was arrested by a police party in the middle of the lecture. He was a shy and bearded youth hut with exemplary courage and spirit of definance. How she had wanted to help him and his societies; to cook food for them, to wash their clothes even go to the front to kill the British officers with a pistol in her hand. Though she is unable to get over the trauma of partition and uses her coordinates of

Notes

distance and time, which separate the two nations along with the hoard of other things, she very soon realizes the truth of it after Tridib's death. This sense was already in her when she told the narrator: Those people took a long time to build that country, hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood—with their brothers' blood with their fathers blood and their sons' blood. They know they are a nation because they have drawn their borders with blood. Was is their religion. That's what it takes to make a country. Once that happens, people forget they were born this way or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: They become a family born of the same pool of blood. That is what you have to achieve for India, don't you see? Ironically this happened with India too and against a common enemy as well but each time Indians fought it was for British and not for themselves. Indian—Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs fought together bravely against the British in World Wars I and II and in other wars in the British interest.

However, her nationalist faiths fail her after the sad experience in Dhaka. She wants completely to do away with other half: Pakistan occupied 'east'. She thinks of a solid demarcation between the two nations but once again she fails because she comes to realize that these borders have a feeble existence and no bloodshed can make them real and opaque. There had been a spree of violence, plunder and rape on either side of the border during the partition but even then it remained porous and so is now. It would be desirable here to make a mention of narrator's feelings who believed in the reality of nations and borders; he believed that across the border there existed another reality. The only relationship his vocabulary permitted between those separate realities was war or friendship. He did not realize then that the relations between countries are governed more by diplomacy and hypocrisy than the blatant truth.

On narrator's father's remark that she might see some greenery between the two countries at the border, she is totally swept off her feet: But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean where is the difference then? And if there is no difference both sides will be the same. It will be just like it used to be before. When we used to catch a train in Dhaka, and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all then— partition and all the killing and everything if there isn't something in between?

The novel does not explain the meaning of political freedom in the modern world but it certainly raises this question to think over. The force of nationalism, which can be destructive at times, however, has been well demonstrated in the novel. The shadow Lines we draw between people and nations can be both an absurd illusion and source of terrifying violence. In 1964, Tha'mma flies of Dhaka, she wonders if she would be able to see the borders between India and East Pakistan from the plane because after so much of violence and human slaughter, she feels that two nations would have built strong walls to distinguish. When her son laughs and asks her if she thought that the border was a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other like it was in a school atlas, she says, 'of-course not'. But surely there is something— trenches perhaps or soldiers or guns pointing at each other or even just a barren strip of land, which they would call no man's land? When she is told that she might see some green fields, she laments the mutilation of motherland for nothing. Born in Dhaka and separated from her birthplace by a history of bloodshed and lines on a map, Tha'mma loses her linguistic accuracy when she thinks of 'home'. She fails to understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality. Where politically it may be essential to have a separate identity and sovereignty the same cannot be said of the people of that state. It may be something thrust upon them, not required by them because they cannot divide the experience or their memories. (General Cariappa on the eve of bidding adieu to the Muslim soldiers on partition said, " We have shared a common destiny so long, that our history is inseparable. We have been brothers and we shall never forget the great years we have lived together. We shall meet again and whenever we meet it will be like brothers.")

Notes

The very place of birth can become alien to them that to go there would mean the possession of a passport or visa and couple of other paper work, may not just be acceptable. The old man when persuaded to come to India says, 'Once your start moving you never stop. That is what I told my sons when they took the trains. I don't believe in this India shindia. It is all very well. You are going away now but suppose when you get there, they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will ever have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here and I will die here.'

The Narrator finds a hero in Tridib and superimposes his personality over him. He has made him his star, a guide and motivating spirit. Tridib has given him worlds to travel in and eyes to see them with and has taught him well to use his imagination with precision. The narrator takes it down well and is always engaged in the imaginative renewal of times, places, events and past peoples. He often gets lost sitting under his grandmother's watchful eyes pretending to do his homework in what Tridib had told him about the sloping roofs of Colombo. The pattern they made, how sharply they rose if one looked at them from below, the mossiness of their tiles when one saw them close up, from a first floor window, and soon he felt that he too could see how much more interesting they were than the snake and the lizard, in the very ordinariness of their difference.

Did u know? The story of *The Shadow Lines* is told by an unnamed and undescribed narrator who despite this handicap is distinctly placed in the novel.

The narrator soon developed this into an uncanny ability and becomes potently armed with his newfound possession and when he goes to London he picks his way to Mrs.Price's house unaided. In the same way he also locates the Left Book Club where Alan Tresawsen had worked before the war. Tridib had once told him about that. And he is quite right. Similarly coming out of the tube station in London, he asks for Sumatra Road and guesses that the air raid shelter should be near by where Maya Devi, Mrs. Price and uncle Alan ducked into on their way back from Mill Lane, when one of those high caliber bombs exploded on Solent Road around the corner, blowing up most of the houses there. He precisely remembers that it was first of October 1940, two days before uncle Alan died. The narrator readily accepts with pride that Tridib had shown him something truer about Solent road, a bomb-devastated picture a long time ago in Calcutta, which had undergone fruitful change.

Once Ila, Robi and the narrator go for a couple of beers in the Grand Hotel in Calcutta. After a drink Ila wished to dance but both narrator and Robi refuse. She says that if they don't dance with her she would dance with somebody else and picks up a businessman.

Robi restrains her saying that girls didn't behave like that there. When she actually leaves for the businessman, Robi gets up and knocks him down. They come out and Ila shouts at him for behaving so violently, and says that she would do what she likes and that is why she had chosen to live in London. It's only because she wanted to be free, free for their culture, free of all of them. This incident adds an important dimension to her character to be reviewed only afterwards. Later when author discusses something about Ila's stay in London with Tha'mma, she says it is not freedom she wants, she wants to be left along to do what she pleases that is all any whore would want. She will find it easy enough over there, that is what those places have to offer. But that is not what it means to be free.

Narrator's grandmother is quite perverse to the idea of narrator's association with Ila in any way other than an ordinary friendship. But she had guessed it correctly that he was in love with her whom she regarded a whore and had been visiting prostitutes in Delhi. Just before a day of her death she writes a letter to the Dean of narrator's college in Delhi that he be thrown out because

Notes

his conduct was not appreciable. Though the narrator is able to save the situation, he wonders how Tha'mma had come so near the truth.

Ila shares her house in London along with a few others. They comprised a bearded Irish computer scientist, a girl from Leiceser who had dropped out in her second year at the North London Polytechnic to work with the Forth International, and a gloomy young Ghanaian who was very active in the Anti-Nazi League. They would spend their evenings sitting around the deal table in the kitchen drinking mugs of tea and some time, when they could afford it, beer. Their conversations were hackneyed and common place and involved the discussion about the petty issues. Despite their bickering, Nick Price and Ila continued to visit each other and this culminates in their marriage, a marriage that is to prove unsuccessful for Nick's flirtatious attitude. Nevertheless they continued to live together under the same roof. Nick Price was unsuccessful with his job in Kuwait and comes to live off his wealthy wife. He thinks of starting some business with Ila's parental help. Thus the novel also sees the high and low of British society.

The narrator is in love with Tridib's niece Ila. But his love is never reciprocated though both of them spent quite sometime together in India as well as in London. Ila once takes him in dark room in Rai Bazar and both of them hide under the table and play houses. Ila calls it a cellar, which is similar to the one in Mrs. Price's house where she plays houses with Nick Price, her lover. The narrator remembers this experience for a long time and the same is relived with her on his visit to Mrs. Price's house years later in London where he went for his Ph.D. thesis. The narrator surprises everyone there with his remarkable ability to memorize and keep the stories in his mind, Tridib had told him. He finds May's house and the Cherry tree inside it an makes Roby remark, 'You are a mystic from the East. You have done it again.'

May price, the daughter to Tresawsen, is kind and simple. She is a student studying at the Royal College of Music and Plays the oboe and joins an orchestra. She had a strong face and a square jaw and her thick straight hair came down to her shoulders. She had a wonderful smile, which lit up her blue eyes and gave her quality of her own and set her apart. When narrator visits her after 17 years of the Dhaka episode, he finds that she was exactly looking the same as he had seen her in Calcutta except that her shoulders had broadened for her height and had thickened; she seemed top heavy now and had not added an inch to her waist.

She earns her living by playing her organ in an orchestra though with a bored mechanical precision. Her income is not much but still she works for philanthropic causes and has joined a couple of small relief agencies, which provided housing for the survivals of an earthquake in Central America. She found great deal if satisfaction in her work and religiously collects money for her cause moving from road to road.

May becomes a victim of cultural dislocation when she comes to India and it sets the stage for personal and public tragedy. Her uncompromising humanitarian approach to humans and animals alike requires that she force Tridib's while they are on the drive to stop and attend to a wounded dog on a highway. Tridib who is driving with May and narrator in the car ignores the plight of the dog and moves ahead but May takes a glimpse and forces him to stop and turn around. She herself slits the throat of the animal to relieve him of the pain. Tridib hesitant in the beginning lends her the helping hand on seeing the energy and commitment of May Price for a Stray dog. The same humanitarian stint comes to the fore when they are surrounded by a rioting mob in Dhaka, overriding all the concerns of the rest of the party she jumps out of the car to save the old man of 90 who is following them on the Rickshaw.

Tha'mma had become widowed at a young age. In order to bring up her son she takes up a job of school teacher and continues there for 27 years. She is quite proud of the fact that she had not taken the help of anybody even from her own rich sister Maya Devi. She retires after 27 years and during this time she had maintained an effective control on her household. After this she becomes a bit lax and wishes to see her native house in Dhaka. By a coincidence Sahib gets a promotion and

Notes

a transfer to Dhaka and May price also visits India during this time. All of them fly together to Dhaka. There were some signs of trouble there and Sahib had forbidden them to move to the old locality during that period but strong-willed and obstinate as Tha'mma is, she put her foot down for a particular day and goes there with Tridib and May Price. In the mob frenzy, Tridib is killed there, so is her old uncle whom she had gone to retrieve.

Self-Assessment

1. Choose the correct options:

(*i*) A good plot deals with

(*a*) Events (*b*) Actions

(*c*) Both (*a*) and (*b*) (*d*) None of these

(*ii*) The time and place of action in the novel is called

(*a*) Plot (*b*) Theme

(*c*) Setting (*d*) None of these

(*iii*) The Shadow Lines began to be written after the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi in the year.

(*a*) 1988 (*b*) 1984

(*c*) 1991 (*d*) None of these

(*iv*) May Price, the daughter of Tresavasen, is

(*a*) Kind and simple (*b*) Aggressive

(*c*) Delectable (*d*) None of these

3.4 Summary

- Any novel, which provides wholesome and stimulant refreshment, is fully justified, but to be really great it must deal not with sheer trifling, which lie upon the surface of life, but with passions, and conflicts and problems, which constitute the very quality of life. It must have greatness of subject and universality of appeal. It does not mean that the subject chosen must be from high life, as the simplest story of the humblest people may also be as appealing as the story of kings or princes.
- The novel deals with events and actions and things, which are suffered and done, and this is what that constitutes the plot. Plot is the basic framework of any piece of writing around which the story is woven. The plot may also be defined as a systematic organization and arrangement of incidents. A good plot is skilfully constructed and avoids gaps and inconsistencies. The events when proceed logically and spontaneously aid the plot to be good. The novelist's method of narration often makes a tedious plot also interesting.
- A good plot grips the attention and the interest of the reader while a loose plot wavers the interest. A compact, symmetrical and a well worked out plot gives aesthetic pleasure.
- A loose plot is the story of detached incidents or episodes having little logical connection with each other. Some unity that is there is provided by the personality of the hero who binds the scattered elements together.
- The time and place of action in the novel is called setting. It includes the entire background of the story—the manners, customs, ways of life the natural background or the environment.
- The Shadow Lines began to be written after the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi in the year 1984. The riots and the general massacre that began in Delhi and followed in other cities have an oblique bearing on the novel. The undertones of political vendetta are pervasive in the novel and can be felt when the efficacy of nationalism is questioned in today's context.

Notes

3.5 Key-Words

1. Assassination : A person who seeks to promote human walfare.
2. Humanitarian : An attack intended to ruin someone's reputation.

3.6 Review Questions

1. Discuss the plot of the Shadow Lines.
2. What is dialogue?
3. What do you mean by settings? Discuss
4. Discuss the Shadow Lines as critique.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (*i*) (*c*) (*ii*) (*c*) (*iii*) (*b*) (*iv*) (*a*)

3.7 Further Readings

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6. Roy, A. 2000. 'Microstoria: Indian Nationalism's "Little Stories" in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*,' *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 35:2 (2000), pp. 35-49.
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Notes

Unit 4: Amitav Ghosh: Shadow Lines: Detailed Study of Part —III (Critical Appreciation)

CONTENTS

Objectives
Introduction
4.1 The Shadow Lines — A Critical Appreciation
4.2 Summary
4.3 Key-Words
4.4 Review Questions
4.5 Further Readings

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Assess the novel Shadow Lines.
- Critically examine the Shadow Lines.

Introduction

One of the chief features of The shadow Lines is that it is not written sequentially. The novel moves back and forth with little regard to the chronology of time and distance.

Therefore distance in The Shadow Lines is a challenge to be overcome by the use of imagination and desire until space melts. Time and space coalesce in a seamless continuity. Both Tridib and the narrator are engaged in the creation of the world as it comes alive to them or to their powerful imagination. Tridib's idea of romantic love in a place without history, without a past is magnificent. It is in this continuation that his ideal becomes the story of a man who fell in love with a woman across the seas. He also does the same and their love between them is powerful and passionate despite a great distance separating them. He has built a whole world with May Price to the extent that he imagines love making with her in wartime London's ruined cinema ball.

His stories and anecdotes about India, England and far away places serve food for thought for the young narrator and he follows in Tridib's foot prints to create worlds for him as it existed and will exist for him. 'Stories are all there to live in', Tridib tells him for if you don't invent stories for yourselves you will have to live in other's invention of them. Narrator begins to imagine the slooping roofs of Ila's house, as it must have existed when Tridib asked him if he noticed that fact. The pattern they made if one wheeled in the sky above them, how sharply they rose if one looked at them from below. Narrator by his dominant imagination is able to create Nick Price in blood and flush and keeps him in his memory as if he had really met him face to face, after Ila tells him about Nick under the table in Rai Bazaar and when he actually meets Nick Price in London he tells him, " I have grown with you."

4.1 The Shadow Lines — A Critical Appreciation

The Shadow Lines is undoubtedly a benchmark in Indian writing in English. The book stirs up a number of themes. Time and distance in The Shadow Lines are illusory. The novel moves back

Notes

and forth and the events are not narrated sequentially. The narrator is a man with great and penetrating insight. He cannot only peep into the past and future but also into the lives of characters.

The novel questions the efficacy of borders. The family of Dutta Choudarys and Prices in London defy the borders between them and there is a continuous to and fro movement between the two. They have good relations despite the racial and cultural differences. Ila gets married to Roby and May falls in love with Tridib. Had the tragedy not struck, then the two might have tied the nuptial knot. It, therefore, demonstrates that there is not much difference between the people across the globe. The humanity is same everywhere. It would not be too bold to say that Ghosh has gone a little too far to bring the people together.

Time and again he has tried to drive home the point that the borders that are drawn are more a source of violence than a mark of an actual separation. After the division of India, a carousal of violence was let loose. People living as brothers for centuries together turned on each other killing, ransacking and maiming one another. 'All the instances of brotherhood and unity of the past were thrown to the wind. The happenings on one side affected and controlled the events on the other.

The undivided India had long been living in peace and harmony and though people followed different religions, they stayed in mutual cooperation. It was towards the beginning of 20th century that the seeds of dissension were sown by some people in connivance with and on provocation of the ruling masters and the matters came to such a pass where the partition was the only choice. M.A. Jinna's obstinate stand for a different nation for the Muslim population was not only myopic but also hazardous. Even after partition, the people lived peacefully except those led by the rumour mills of their brothers being attacked and killed in the other parts. The most to suffer were typical plodding countrymen who did not even know who M.A. Jinna or J.L. Nehru was or what was India being partitioned for. The old uncle to Tha'mma gives entry to a Muslim family, which stays with him and looks after him. Khali, the rickshaw driver is more concerned for him than his own family; and both the innocents are killed in the riots. The old folks stay where their roots are. They have an unqualified love and a deep sense of belonging for the place where they have been born. Tha'mma wants to get back to her native place in Dhaka and her uncle does not want to come to India. Both of them do not believe in the borders. Riots and other things of such nature are very transient in nature and get sucked up in the history and fade away from public memory before long. *The Shadow Lines* makes it amply clear.

The resurgent nature of the people's separatist tendencies is certainly taking the world by storm. Where on one hand, the world has become a miniature globe due to the rapid progress of information technology and means of transport; the other differences have cropped up that are obstacles to linking people and promotion of world peace or the idea of one Government. Be it in India or Sri Lanka or Africa or Ireland, there is constant effort to establish a separate identity by secessionists. Nationalism has been under a constant attack for these developments.

The Shadow Lines questions the sanity and efficacy of the borders that divide. These lines that are drawn on maps and on lands are powerless. These lines may put the people in different groups but they cannot divide and experience or memory as experienced by Tha'mma, her 90-year old uncle, Roby or by the narrator but they are certainly capable in one thing, that is, wreaking havoc, spree of violence, rape, murder and loot. In most of these cases the commoners neither have a say nor a will for such division. It is a handiwork of a few hungry of either power or ruled by fanatic dispositions.

Ghosh has also been able to comment on the riots, which are the result of people's insensitivity to their religion and the religion of others. A few amongst them, by fiery speeches or actions, play on the most sensitive realm of human beings—emotions and put them against each other. While the gullible bathe in blood and mutilation of limbs, they revel over a drink in the air-conditioned rooms.

Notes

If people think that they can divide the people by dividing the territory then they are sadly mistaken. The lines are only a mirage. No body can ever divide a memory or experience. The happenings in Kashmir on the eve of disappearance of the hair relic clearly demonstrated the same and benevolent nature of man. The villages on the Indian borders are more close to each other than the relatives on the either side. They still cross over without fear and get their daughters and sons married in the families across the border. These lines cannot set people free, had it been so Tridib's death would have set Roby free.

However, despite the weaknesses of these borders they also have their strengths which *The Shadow Lines* blithely ignores and no matter how much we may dislike them they would continue to exist and have their weightage. These lines, which mark the borders and distinguish one piece of land from the other, are certainly not warranted but even if these lines were not drawn the differences would persist. Then the culture, the origin, the customs and the influence of the areas would become the natural boundaries. We may do away with the lines that we sketch with the pencils on the map and by barbed wires or trenches on the land, the whole humanity is hard to be put under one umbrella. This is what suggests at the present. To say that earth is but one country and mankind its citizens will be rhetorical. A line has got to be drawn somewhere. To talk in practical terms even a large family gets cracked up and divisions take place like in the case of Tha'mma's joint family where the walls were erected to mark the separation. Then what can be said about the nations housing millions of people some times divided by the lines of caste, religion, origin, customs etc and about the world housing the nations? Good fence make good neigbhours. Fences are the touchstone of sanity, to take in practical terms. Distance separates but it also goes without says that it makes the hearts go fonder. One has to respect the other in order to keep the good relationship and good neighborliness and this comes only if each maintains certain distance.

The narrator gives an incident of Jammu and Kashmir when Mu-i-Mubarak believed to have been the heir of prophet Mohammad himself was lost. In Kashmir the riots did not breaks out. The situations though was very tense and volatile, did not have any effect on the health of the people. People expressed their anger; and violence irrupted but it had a difference. It was not directed against other religious communities but against all the properties identified with the Government and Police. It happened this way because situation was not exploited by the so-called self-appointed guardians of humanity and religious communities. The sanity prevailed. The emotions of the people were not played with. The credit also goes to Maulana Masudi— an authentic leader, forgotten and unsung today who persuaded the first demonstrators to march with black flag instead of green and there by drew various communities of Kashmir together in a collective display of mourning.

Similarly, when it was discovered and restored to its place there was a lot of rejoicing. People came out on the street, danced together, and distributed the sweets though Pakistan was provoking the local populace. People were chanting 'central intelligence Jindabad' while on the other side a procession protesting against the displacement of the relic turned violent and many people were killed and injured. Thus it depends upon how you take up a situation. What surprised the narrator was that even after so many killings, looting and arson, riots are transient in public and Government's memory. The newspapers talked about the test match at Madras, which happened during the same time, and about the congress and other political news, the riots were never discussed. When they were happening the newspapers gave the details and details after details of accurate description. But once they were over there was nothing left to describe and they never spoke of it again. The Shadow Lines has thus an escapist tendency here as the narrator states, "But for those other things we can only use words of description when they happen and then fall silent.

Notes

For to look for words of any other kind would be to give them meaning, and that is a risk we cannot take any more than we can afford to listen to madness." Such an approach can at best be described as wishing away the realities. But the hard fact is that realities do not go away simply because you close your eyes to it. The riots that are not discussed or causative factors sorted out would not bring one to reality and equip one to face the menace and stop its recurrence. It shows the lack of courage to take up the situation.

Notes

The Shadow Lines has also thrown some light on the riots, their nature and brutalities. The riots erupt due to the impulsive and rash action caused by provocation, more easily in those superfluous religious enthusiasts and self appointed champions who lose no time in fanning hatred and subversive activities.

The state is not free from the blame because it does nothing to restrict them or discourage them. Very often the existence of the Government depends upon them. Speaking or taking a stand against them means losing the popular votes for they do command those particular sections whose wrath may turn the tide against them.

The shadow lines is a continuous struggle of the author to undo the demarcations to prevent the establishment of the borders. And to reinforce his ideology, he has even gone to the extent that nationalism is a defunct force. Nationalism has been under attack in the novel, which is perceived as a hurdle in the unification of mankind. Tha' mma initially is projected as a great enthusiast of the concept of the nation and nationalism, the one who would not mind holding a pistol and killing for freedom. She believes in strength and opines that without building a good body first, one cannot build a strong nation, and similar other views. Her nationalism is broad enough to include the two nations and the line drawn as border between her native place in Dhaka and her present stay at Calcutta disturbs her. She stills grows nostalgic about her home in Dhaka. After the border between the two countries was demarcated, she believes that it separates. She believed that there would be trenches or soldiers pointing guns at each other. That the two would be distinct identities but to her dismay she finds otherwise and that is the reason she laments: Why all this killing, so much of blood shed if there was nothing to demarcate. It would be the same when we used to take a train from Dhaka and reach Calcutta. After the cruel killing of Tridib and the old man on the street of Dhaka her nationalism shrinks. It comes to denote India now. She tells her grandson that they must treat them now with guns and bullets and gifts away her only necklace to the war fund. She grows fanatical to the extent of donating a few drops of blood that drip when she bangs her fist on the radio. But the million–dollar question, which is best explained by Roby outside in London, is how many lines can be drawn. Everywhere they are doing it to be free —in Assam, the northeast, Punjab, Sri Lanka, Tripura. People are shot by terrorists and separatists and the army and the police. 'You will find somewhere behind it all that single word; every one is doing it to be free.' says he. He also remembers an incident when he would tell his policemen to be firm and kill whole villages if necessary to track down the terrorists for they should be willing to pay a price of their unity and freedom and on his return he would find a note saying ' we are going to get you, nothing personal, we have to kill you for our freedom'. Roby sums this up by saying: "why don't they draw thousands of little lines through the whole sub continent and give every free place a new name?" 'What would it change? It is a mirage, the whole of this is a mirage.' Even after hundreds of lines are drawn peace will not prevail. It will only lead to greater distrust

Notes

and sour relations. No one can divide the memory. People in that case also [after the borders are marked] continue to be on friendly terms then why to do all this? And this also happens to be the message to The shadow Lines.

Nationalism has been painted black in The shadow lines. It is held responsible though obliquely for division and separation. Tha'mma has been ridiculed as fossilized specimen of nationalism. However, to hold nationalism only responsible for such results in my opinion would be unfair. And to affirm the death of nationalism would be making a profound and authoritative statement.

It is agreed that the present form of nationalism can become the greatest obstacle to world unity and world peace. Nationalism was present in nascent form in very early societies. The tribal instinct has been magnified beyond limits resulting in political megalomania. But only nationalism is not to blame. There are other forces as well, which are responsible for division and conflict. Race, religion, colour, caste, economic difference, customs and languages are potent factors for realization of world government or world peace, Unlike Dutta Choudarys and the Prices in London, crossing national frontiers is quite a task for an average man. They have overcome the nationality and the borders because they are privileged and rich. Taking off from one country and landing in another is not difficult for them nor is their stay in different places. They might view the world as one but a common man still sticks to his place of birth that he calls his motherland and it is dearer a place than any other place on the earth. He has his reservations about other countries.

The novel has also thrown some light on the Hindu-Muslim relationship in the past. In the riots during the division, there were instances of Muslim families in Pakistan giving shelter to Hindus at the risk of their own life and Hindus in India doing the same. The discrimination and differences between the two communities are predominantly illusory. Khalil was a Muslim and a poor man but looked after the old man as if he was his own father but the bitter truth and irony remains that both the innocents are killed as it always happens. The mob does not distinguish between the rich and the poor, co-religionists or pagans.

Self-Assessment

1. Choose the correct option:

(*i*) The shadow lines questions the

(*a*) Sanity (*b*) Efficacy

(*c*) Both (*a*) and (b) (*d*) None of these

(*ii*) ..... ridiculed as fossilized specimen of nationalism.

(*a*) May (*b*) Tha'mma

(*c*) The Narrator (*d*) None of these

(*iii*) ..... was killed cruelly.

(*a*) May (*b*) The Narrator

(*c*) Nick (*d*) Tridib

4.2 Summary

- The Shadow Lines is undoubtedly a benchmark in Indian writing in English. The book stirs up a number of themes. Time and distance in The Shadow Lines are illusory. The novel moves back and forth and the events are not narrated sequentially. The narrator is a man with great and penetrating insight. He cannot only peep into the past and future but also into the lives of characters.

Notes

- The novel questions the efficacy of borders. The family of Dutta Choudarys and Prices in London defy the borders between them and there is a continuous to and fro movement between the two. They have good relations despite the racial and cultural differences. Ila gets married to Roby and May falls in love with Tridib.
- Time and again he has tried to drive home the point that the borders that are drawn are more a source of violence than a mark of an actual separation. After the division of India, a carousal of violence was let loose.
- The Shadow Lines questions the sanity and efficacy of the borders that divide. These lines that are drawn on maps and on lands are powerless. These lines may put the people in different groups but they cannot divide and experience or memory as experienced by Tha'mma, her 90-year old uncle, Roby or by the narrator but they are certainly capable in one thing, that is, wreaking havoc, spree of violence, rape, murder and loot. In most of these cases the commoners neither have a say nor a will for such division. It is a handiwork of a few hungry of either power or ruled by fanatic dispositions.
- The narrator gives an incident of Jammu and Kashmir when Mu-i-Mubarak believed to have been the heir of prophet Mohammad himself was lost. In Kashmir the riots did not breaks out. The situations though was very tense and volatile, did not have any effect on the health of the people.
- The shadow lines is a continuous struggle of the author to undo the demarcations to prevent the establishment of the borders. And to reinforce his ideology, he has even gone to the extent that nationalism is a defunct force. Nationalism has been under attack in the novel, which is perceived as a hurdle in the unification of mankind.
- Nationalism has been painted black in The shadow lines. It is held responsible though obliquely for division and separation. Tha'mma has been ridiculed as fossilized specimen of nationalism. However, to hold nationalism only responsible for such results in my opinion would be unfair. And to affirm the death of nationalism would be making a profound and authoritative statement.
- The novel has also thrown some light on the Hindu-Muslim relationship in the past. In the riots during the division, there were instances of Muslim families in Pakistan giving shelter to Hindus at the risk of their own life and Hindus in India doing the same. The discrimination and differences between the two communities are predominantly illusory.

4.3 Key-Words

1. Fanatic : A person filled with excessive and single minded zeal, especially for an extreme religious or political cause.
2. Efficacy : The ability to produce a desired or intended result.

4.4 Review Questions

1. Briefly describe the novel 'Shadow Lines'.
2. Write a critical appreciation of the novel 'Shadow Lines.'

Notes

4.5 Further Readings

Books

1. Bagchi, Nivedita. "The Process of Validation in Relation to Materiality and Historical Reconstruction in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 39:1 (Spring 1993). pp. 187-202.
2. Bose, Brinda. (ed.) 2003. *Amitav Ghosh : Critical Perspectives*. Delhi: Pencraft Couto, M. 1988. 'Threads and Shards,' (review of *The Shadow Lines*), *Times Literary Supplement*, 28 October –3 November 1988, 1212.
3. Dhawan, R.K. (ed.). 1999. *The Novels of Amitav Ghosh*, New Delhi: Prestige Books. James, Louis and Jan Shepherd. "Shadow Lines: Cross Cultural Perspectives in the Fiction of Amitav Ghosh." *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* (Dijon, France) 14:1 (Autumn, 1991): pp. 28-32.
4. The Oxford UP (India) – Delhi: Oxford UP, 1995 – edition contains 4 articles: Kaul, AN. "A Reading of *The Shadow Lines*." pp. 299-309.
5. Kaul, Suvir. "Separation Anxiety: Growing up Inter/National in *The Shadow lines*." pp. 268-286.
6. Roy, A. 2000. 'Microstoria: Indian Nationalism's "Little Stories" in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*,' *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 35:2 (2000), pp. 35-49.
7. Sundar Rajan, Rajeswari. "The Division of Experience in *The Shadow Lines*." pp. 287-298.
8. Mukherjee, Meenakshi. "Maps and Mirrors: Coordinates of Meaning in *The Shadow Lines*." pp. 255-267.
9. In Viney Kirpal, ed. *The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980's* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers Ltd.

Notes

Unit 5: Amitav Ghosh: Shadow Lines: Theme of Nationality

CONTENTS

Objectives
Introduction
5.1 Themes of Shadow The Lines
5.2 Summary
5.3 Key-Words
5.4 Review Questions
5.5 Further Readings

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Portray the novel 'Shadow Lines.'
- Discuss themes of 'Shadow Lines.'

Introduction

The Shadow Lines portray discreetly though casually the racial. Ila was often out by Nick Price in school or on their way home, as he was ashamed of being seen in the company of an Indian. Ila conjures up a story about Magda who was troubled and beaten by Denise, a strongly built girl. Unconsciously she gives a vent to her trauma of prejudice, which she had faced.

Though the world is becoming a globe and lines across the nations are either being weakened or removed totally still the differences persist at the same time. Many new nations are either being divided or new ones are emerging after drawing these lines. These lines can be a source of perpetual and terrifying violence. Though the author defies these lines, he has respect for one's culture and roots in his utopian word of harmony and peace without which the person would only have a blank identity. Ila is a concrete example of this who respects neither territorial nor culture frontiers.

Did u know? One of the most important themes, which also becomes an important feature of *The Shadow Lines*, is the inefficacy of the lines drawn as borders whom author calls as shadow lines.

Another Important feature of *The Shadow Lines* is the havoc and the terror created by the riots, which find a mention in the novel. Despite the orgy of violence, bloodshed and merciless killing, they have a transient existence. They are washed out from the public memory before long. The narrator is at a loss to know that his friend, Malik at Delhi does not remember anything about the riots that took place in Calcutta and Dhaka almost the same time in which many were killed including his role model Tridib and neither do the newspapers carry any significant report on it or attach much importance. 'Then what is all this violence for?' he questions.

Notes

The Shadow Lines underlines the fact that human kind everywhere is the same. Characters intermingle not as members of distinct culture but as complex individuals in a world where geographic boundaries have truly becomes the *shadow Lines.* These boundaries are like a mirror that seem to reflect not their differences but their similarities. May Price falls in love with Tridib and Nick marries Ila? The Prices are in good relationship with Dutta Choudary's family and this friendship spans over three generations. The British and the Indians remain locked for three hundred years in 'ruler and the ruled' relationship. The cultural differences do exist but it is not that cannot live in harmony.

The role of nationalism in the modern times has been under attack in the novel. While it served a useful purpose in modern India in the first half of the previous century, the same cannot be said of it in the second half. Tha'mma is projected as a staunch nationalist who would give up her life to get freedom. The nationalist fervor in her is brimming. She worships strength and tells her grandson that he cannot build a strong nation unless he has a strong body and makes him go for a run everyday. It is because of this that she likes Robi for his big body and powerful muscles.

Nationalism is responsible for the great strides some countries have made. It distinguishes the countries from mere geographical entities to living entities. Nationalism had been present in embryonic sense as a feeling and a force in very early societies on earth. India and many other colonies owe their freedom to the spirit of nationalism. But there is no denying the fact that nationalism in the modern sense has emerged as a military force with imperialistic designs. In derives its strength from the race, culture, language and few other things common to a community progress and its identity so much so that it does not remain limited to a nationality but becomes a nation. And this is the negative aspect of nationalism, which has also been the focus of study in The Shadow Lines. To say 'Nationalism creates nations where they don't exist' will not be all that wrong.

Women are more powerful and active characters in the novel than their counterparts who are passive with an exception to the Prices.

Removal of the boundaries or the borders so that the earth becomes but one country and mankind its citizens or to talk in more practical terms, formation of a world Government or at least peaceful co-existence without losing the cultural identity seems to be the message of *The Shadow Lines.*

5.1 Themes of The Shadow Lines

First and foremost theme of The Shadow Lines is that it is an attempt to draw the attention of the world to do away with borders that divide the people. Humanity after all is the same everywhere and any attempt to create differences is not only hazardous but also futile. There is nothing on earth that can divide a memory. Many lines and borders may be drawn but it can never set people free of their reminiscences, free of their associations, free of the love and the sense of belonging for their place of birth. The second thing it considers is how many of these lines can be drawn or divisions made. As Roby rightly pointed out, it is all a mirage. The world cannot be divided into innumerable small states to satisfy the urge of the people to give their frantic sense of nationalism a political entity and a name. If such a thing could give freedom then perhaps it was worth it but as Roby himself is tediously familiar of the fact that it is not. Tridib's death would have set him free but in seventeen years of his demise Roby has not been able to either forget him or his manner of death. Similarly in Indian context, first it was the creation of Pakistan then the demand arose for Punjab, the North East and then Kashmir. Partition or secession is no solution. It may on the other hand trigger the never-ending hostilities and violence. There can be no better example than India.

For a privileged section of society like Dutta Choudarys, the borders have already stopped existing. They frequent from one country to another and are quite at home and comfortable in other states. For Sahib and family India, London or Dhaka; it's all the same. He is as comfortable there as he is in India.

Notes

For Ila frontiers of nations have been reduced to airport lounges. Like her father, she is also a frequent visitor of the countries. But besides territorial borders, she does not recognize cultural borders as well which, as the novel reveals, may be fatal.

Tridib's ideal story is about a time when Europe was a better place, a place without borders and countries—, a man without a country who fell in love with a woman across the seas. In his powerful imagination there exist lots of countries and people but no frontiers.

Narrator believes in the reality of space, that the distance separates but is sadly mistaken. He felt that the two pieces of land would slip away from each other like the tectonic plates of Gondwanaland but is amazed to find that there had never been a moment in the four-thousand-year-old history of that map when the places they knew as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines —so closely that he (narrator) in Calcutta had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other locked into an irreversible symmetry of the line that was to set them free—their looking glass borders. These borders that are drawn are mere shadow lines according to the author, which often play a role opposite to what they are actually meant to. They reflect not the differences but the similarities and interdependence.

Tha'mma is another example in the novel who cannot bring her to adjust to the fact that her freedom of movement has been restricted by the line that we call border. Her Dhaka is still very alive and colourful in her memory as it was before in reality until Tridib's killing in Dhaka.

There are a good number of instances, which show a good fusion of language, culture and counties to bring home the point that the earth after all is like one country. But at the same time The shadow Lines is also a warning for the cultureless identity. Ila is a burning example.

Another theme of the novel is the concept of nationalism that is gaining ground in today's world. The author has held the extreme form of nationalism responsible for many a problem these days. The separatist and secessionist tendencies are the outcome of it. Love of the country, passion inspired nationalism and intoxication of patriotism cannot but lead to jingoism. Thus nationalism which had and which has great uses can become the greatest obstacle to world peace. This tribal instinct has been magnified beyond all measures resulting in political and economic megalomania. And the novel in its enthusiasm to prove the point has gone a little too far to proclaim that nationalism is a defunct force and in this background Tha'mma is ridiculed as 'a still surviving specimen of fossilized nationalism.'

Another theme of The shadow Lines is that the time and distance are shadows. The novel makes a smooth transition from present to the past and from past to the future without causing any friction. The novel highlights the reality of the fictions people create around their lives. Tridib says that every one lives in the story for stories are all there to live in, it is just a question of which one we choose. Thus it is a flight into the imagination where distance and time melt away. The story moves back and forth and many event in London are just the reliving of the events the narrator had imagined sitting in Calcutta. These events, however, do not bring about any dislocation because in time and space actual and imagined have a harmonious co-existence.

Self-Assessment

1. Choose the correct options:

(*i*) It is all a mirage

(*a*) Roby (*b*) Tridib

(*c*) Narrator (*d*) None of these

(*ii*) Shadow Lines is a warning for the cultureless identity, for example

(*a*) Ila (*b*) Tridib

(*c*) Grand Ma (*d*) None of these

Notes

5.2 Summary

- The Shadow Lines portray discreetly though casually the racial. Ila was often out by Nick Price in school or on their way home, as he was ashamed of being seen in the company of an Indian. Ila conjures up a story about Magda who was troubled and beaten by Denise, a strongly built girl. Unconsciously she gives a vent to her trauma of prejudice, which she had faced.
- Another Important feature of *The Shadow Lines* is the havoc and the terror created by the riots, which find a mention in the novel. Despite the orgy of violence, bloodshed and merciless killing, they have a transient existence. They are washed out from the public memory before long. The narrator is at a loss to know that his friend, Malik at Delhi does not remember anything about the riots that took place in Calcutta and Dhaka almost the same time in which many were killed including his role model Tridib and neither do the newspapers carry any significant report on it or attach much importance. 'Then what is all this violence for?' he questions.
- The Shadow Lines underlines the fact that human kind everywhere is the same. Characters intermingle not as members of distinct culture but as complex individuals in a world where geographic boundaries have truly becomes the *shadow Lines.*
- Another theme of the novel is the concept of nationalism that is gaining ground in today's world. The author has held the extreme form of nationalism responsible for many a problem these days. The separatist and secessionist tendencies are the outcome of it. Love of the country, passion inspired nationalism and intoxication of patriotism cannot but lead to jingoism.
- Another theme of The shadow Lines is that the time and distance are shadows. The novel makes a smooth transition from present to the past and from past to the future without causing any friction. The novel highlights the reality of the fictions people create around their lives. Tridib says that every one lives in the story for stories are all there to live in, it is just a question of which one we choose. Thus it is a flight into the imagination where distance and time melt away.

5.3 Key-Words

1. Hazardous : Dangerous.
2. Dislocation : Disturbance from a proper, original, or usual place or state.

5.4 Review Questions

1. Discuss the theme of Nationality in Shadow Lines.
2. Time and distance are shadows. Discuss.
3. Write a short notes on the themes of Shadow Lines.
4. What are the features of Shadow Lines?

5.5 Further Readings

1. Bagchi, Nivedita. "The Process of Validation in Relation to Materiality and Historical Reconstruction in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 39:1 (Spring 1993). pp. 187-202.

Notes

2. Bose, Brinda. (ed.) 2003. *Amitav Ghosh : Critical Perspectives*. Delhi: Pencraft Couto, M. 1988. 'Threads and Shards,' (review of *The Shadow Lines*), *Times Literary Supplement*, 28 October –3 November 1988, 1212.
3. Dhawan, R.K. (ed.). 1999. *The Novels of Amitav Ghosh*, New Delhi: Prestige Books. James, Louis and Jan Shepherd. "Shadow Lines: Cross Cultural Perspectives in the Fiction of Amitav Ghosh." *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* (Dijon, France) 14:1 (Autumn, 1991): pp. 28-32.
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Notes

Unit 6: Amitav Ghosh: Shadow Lines: Characterisation

CONTENTS

Objectives
Introduction
6.1 Characterisation
6.2 Summary
6.3 Key-Words
6.4 Review Questions
6.5 Further Readings

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Know various characters in Shadow Lines.
- Discuss the role of Tridib and Grandmother.

Introduction

The characters or the dramatis personae are the ones to whom things happen and they suffer and carry out the action of the novel. A novel's success to a great extent depends upon the vivid and graphic characterization. The characters should appear to be lively and move us as people in real life do. We should sympathize with them as we do with people in real life and their remembrance should linger in our memory when the book is laid aside and its details perhaps forgotten.

Commonly, there are two ways to portray the characters—one is direct or analytical and the second is indirect. In the first case, the novelist sketches his characters from the outside, dissects their passions, motives, thoughts and feelings, explains and comments on their acts. In the second case he stays out and his characters reveal themselves through their speech and action. The remarks, observations and judgments of other characters often make an enhancement in our understanding of them.

The plot and characterization are always united in a novel. In some novels the interest of particular character(s) is uppermost and action is used mainly with reference to this and in the other one the plot is uppermost and characters are used mainly to carry out the action. When the plot and characterizations are brought out together harmoniously and logically it proves to be a success. In the novel(s) where the interest of the plot is uppermost, the personality of the actors often suffers and they are not given either the due weightage or importance. The plot has little or no reference to them and their case may be like that of puppets being pulled at will by the showman.

6.1 Characterisation

6.1.1 Tha'mma

Born in Jindabahar in Dhaka in a joint family, she grew up when the Indian National Movement was gaining a militant note and fight against the British was jointly being spearheaded by Mahatma Gandhi and the militant nationalists together. Tha'mma was quick tempered with a deep sense of freedom. She is proud, stubborn and strong-willed. She along with Ila is an itinerant character.

Notes

Her dislocation is a product of her circumstances. She is perplexed at the history that has led her place of birth to be so messily at odds with her nationality and has made her a foreigner in her hometown, Dhaka. She relates an incident of her college life of 1920s when one of her classmates was arrested by the police for revolutionary terrorism who looked shy and frail but had a great resolution and unrepentence for serving the cause of national freedom. Tha'mma so fervently wished to help him in any way she could, right from cooking the food to washing the clothes. She states that she could even have killed the British and the Police Officers for freedom.

She gets married to a man who gets postings in the neighboring countries and leaves Dhaka and goes to different places before finally coming down to Calcutta after her husband's premature death from pneumonia. She takes up the teaching job in one of the local schools and continues to serve there for twenty-seven years and retires as a Principal in the year 1962. It was with this job that she brings her son up and takes pride in her refusal for help from anybody especially from her rich sister Maya Devi. Tha'mma is a strict disciplinarian who was very punctilious about the right use of time and lost her temper if anybody wasted it. This was one of the reasons for her disapproval of Tridib and his waste of time. For her time was like a toothbrush: it went mouldy if it was not used and it began to stink. In her house no chessboard or any pack of cards was allowed. There was battered Ludo Set somewhere but the narrator was only allowed to play when he was ill.

The second person that did not find her favour was Ila, the daughter of her sister Maya Devi. She did not want that her grandson should associate himself in anyway other than ordinary friendship with her and regards her as a whore. For her, Ila is firmly outside the pale of sobriety and common Indians, her looks and her clothes were inappropriate to her Bengali middle class origins: 'Her hair cut short like a bristle on the tooth brush, wearing tight trousers like a Free School Street whore', she comments. Her concept of freedom is quite different from that of Ila. On Narrators' interference that she stays in London because she wants freedom, Tha'mma quips 'It is not freedom she wants—She wants to be left alone to do as she pleases; that is all that any whore would want. She will find it easily enough over there; that is what those places have to offer. But that is not what it means to be free.' Ila on her part regards her as a fascist. Tha'mma's dislike for her is so much that a day before her death she writes to the Dean in Delhi where the narrator was pursuing his Ph.D that her grandson had been visiting the whores and he should be sent home. Until before her retirement, she had always been careful to maintain a titular control of the running of the household: Everybody was kept in her place by her; mother at housekeeping, father at his job and the narrator at his school and homework. Mother was not allowed to listen to her favourite programme on the radio more than once a week but now she did not seem to care any more. The narrator states that it was his mother that he was to go then when he was hungry ad wanted the keys to the cupboard in which the Dalmot was kept or when he wanted money to buy peanuts at the lake. There seemed to be quite a change that came over her and now she would often look out of the window and get lost in herself.

Tha'mma was a woman with conviction and views of her own which she did not want to be flouted or over-ruled. She had contempt for the Sahib for his drinking but a deeper insight would reveal that it was based on the same iron fairness that she picked up from the school, which prompted her to pass commands. She dismissed one of her closest friends—a good-natured but chronically lazy woman; from her job in the school. For Sahib, she thought that he was not fit for his present high job; that he was weak and spineless and it was impossible to think of him being from under threat, of reacting to a difficult or dangerous situation with that controlled, accurate violence which was the quality she priced above all others in men who had to deal with matters of states. It was in continuation of her iron fairness that she does not approve of helping her relative, a sister in law in Calcutta, when she goes to visit her. The lady wanted her son to be

Notes

placed somewhere through her connections but she later said, "Don't get taken in by these stories. Once these people start making demands it never ends. Did anyone do anything to help me when I was living like that?"

Tha'mma is a steadfast nationalist. She is in love with her place of birth in Dhaka and cannot forget it in any way. The partioned India and the line drawn between Calcutta; her present place of stay and Dhaka does not make any sense to her. She comes to realize that borders have a weak existence and not even the history of bloodshed can make them truly impregnable. She is undiplomatic and straight. For her, it is either this way or that but no in between. She had believed that she would be able to see the borders between India and East Pakistan from the plane. She also believes that there must be something— trenches perhaps or soldiers or guns pointing at each other or just barren strips of land which would be called no man's land but when she is told that she might see some green fields she is baffled and what she says raises a very important question. '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 will be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a 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?' Born in Dhaka, separated from her birthplace by a history of bloodshed and lines on the map she loses her linguistic precision in terms of her home. She fails to understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality. In her bafflement she says she would come home to Dhaka rather than saying 'she would go home to Dhaka' and this becomes a family joke.

She had long believed that nostalgia is a weakness. 'It is everyone's duty to forget the past and look ahead and get on with building the future', she used to say. But one in Dhaka, she understands the harsh reality of the border and realizes that dislocated people like her have no home but in memory. Stunned by her nephew Tridib's death by a riotous mob in Dhaka she develops a great hatred for Pakistanis. In 1965, one and a half years after her arrival from Dhaka, the Indo-Pak was starts and she gifts away her only necklace which was the last remembrance of her husband which she had never parted with even when she underwent gall-bladder stone surgery; to the war fund so that they may fight them properly at last with tanks and guns and bombs. She says to her grand son 'For your sake, for your freedom.'

Her concepts of nationalism, nationhood and the formation of Indian state are quite clear and forceful. It is observed in her perception of her early days when she saw, felt and experienced the tremors of British imperialism. Her sense of freedom and nationhood was sharpened. She finds Ila to be at odds with England and feels she has grafted herself on it. She tells her grandson—It took those people a long time to build that country; hundred of years, years and years of wars and bloodshed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood: with their brother's blood and their fathers 'blood and their sons' blood. They know they are a nation because they have drawn their borders with blood. Regimental flags hang on all their cathedrals and their churches are lined with memorials of men who died in wars, all around the word. War is their religion. That is what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this way or that, Muslim of Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi. They become a family born of the same pool of the blood. That is what your have to achieve for India, don't you see? Hence when she suffers the greatest burden of historical dislocation, she finds herself aghast and at loss for words. She says: then what was the need for all this bloodshed and violence. However, her action in Dhaka in the face of the grim tragedy of the mob attack when she asks the driver to take away the car leaving her old uncle behind whom she had gone to retrieve puts her in the tight spot. Her earlier avowal of killing instinct when she narrated the incident of her classmate now sounds hollow.

Notes

6.1.2 Ila

Ila is the grand daughter of Maya Devi and Tridib's niece. Her father keeps getting transferred from one country to another and as such she is raised all over the world. She is ultra modern in looks, behaviour and thinking. Tha'mma and she stand on two extreme ends of a bar. She lives in the present. With the memories of the past and the imagination of the future she does not have to do anything. Ila is an unimaginative realist. She could not be persuaded to believe that a place did not merely exist but it had to be invented in one's imagination. That is why although she had lived in many places she had never traveled at all. For her, current was the real. She attaches no value to the past and does not have any good reminisces. That is why her boy friends change as quickly as one changes the toothbrush. It was also because of this and her lack of roots in one culture that she is unable to think of the compatibility of her relationship or subsequent marriage with Nick Price and it ends in failure. She functions as the obverse of the imaginative traveler. She is the globe-trotting daughter of a diplomat who himself is a world traveler. She has traveled a lot in her young age but experienced nothing. For her, the traveling of the world wide countries stay in her memory as nothing but the pictures of airport lounges and the locations of the toilets. For her the London Underground is just a mode of transportation. Here she stands in a total contrast to the narrator who believes passionately that a place does not merely exist but it has to be invented in one's imagination. She is also a victim of cultural dislocation and mal-adjustment for being raised all over the world. She fails of cultivate roots and sense of belonging for any place. Ila's cosmopolitanism is superfluous, as it is not rooted in any of the cultures. For Tha'mma, Ila is firmly outside the pale of sobriety and decent living. What ever it may be , Ila is honest about what she is and does not have to do the double speak. She does not like Roby when he refuses to drink in the Grand Hotel. 'Drink!' cried Roby, 'In a place like that?' She said sharply, 'what is the matter you do drink, don't you? What about that story you were telling me about the send off you got from your fans in college. You are a little hypocrite.' For Ila morality if it existed could only be in absolute. She could understand and admire someone who never ate meat on principle but a person who was vegetarian only at home was to her, the worst kind of hypocrite. She also knew that Roby was quite happy to risk expulsion occasionally by smuggling bottles of rum into his college room and drinking the nights away with his friends. But she could not feel the difference between the two locales and the circumstances. There was a kind of difference between the monastic life of college where the students often played truant or indulged in one nasty thing or the other for they would often revel in observing the rules more by its breach. But there was nothing wrong in it. These differences would not come to her straightforward nature. Her looks and her clothes are inappropriate to her Bengali middle class origins. Tha'mma quips, "... Her hair cut short like the bristles on the toothbrush wearing tight trousers like a free school street whore. According to her she stays in London because she wants to be free, free of everybody. But it is not the freedom she wants, she wants to be left alone to do as she pleases, that is all that any whore would want. She will find it easily enough over there, that is what those places have to offer. But that is not what it means to be free." The same thing is reflected when along with Robi and the narrator she goes to the nightclub in the Calcutta's Grand Hotel where the three of them go drinking and she wants to dance with a businessman. Robi stops her and pushes the businessmen away. She get furious and says what did you think you were doing? Robi says that girls do not behave like that over her. She could do what she liked in England but there are certain things she couldn't do. 'That is our culture that is how we live', adds he. She breaks away from them and shouts to the narrator, 'Do you see why I have chosen to live in London. Do you see, it is only because I want to be free–free of your bloody culture and free of you?' Her Childhood relationship with Nick is founded on an illusion of infallibility and decency of the British society. When the adult narrator discovers that Nick sleeps with other women even after being married to Ila, it does not surprise him much. The cultural or racial divides do the work here and the burden of indivisible Shadow Lines is borne greatest by her. Her marriage with Nick Price is a total disaster but she hides the

Notes

facts as age goes on to believe that one day it would be all right. She tells the narrator, 'I wouldn't leave him if he moves a whole bloody message parlor from Bangkok into the house. He knows that perfectly well. He knows that I love him so much that I would never leave him'. She definitely wins our admiration for her total surrender to Nick and her boundless love for him. Towards the end, the Narrator said, Ila had called up a few days before his departure saying that she would be too willing to help him but a day before he actually left for India, the narrator phoned her up, she expressed her inability as Nick and she were going on a holiday after a brief fight and told him not to believe anything she had said about Nick's infidelity the other day i.e. he was sleeping with other women in the house.

Calcutta's social environment is stifling for her and she escapes to London. She marries an Englishman, buys a house, finds a job, tries to settle down but fails. She lives in London because she wanted to be free , a freedom that is really shallow.

Ila shares a house in London with a group of people who are activists in various movements like the Forth International and the Anti-Nazi League. She is regarded as an upper class Asian Marxist. She grandly imagines that their endeavor will become a part of history, that in the future everyone will look to them quite in Nigeria, India, Malaysia etc.

Whatever the case may be she is more of a sympathetic character than an object of scorn or repulsion.

6.1.3 Narrator

The Shadow Lines come to us through the narration but the narrator remains unnamed and undescribed. In spite of that he is decisively placed in the novel. He is Tha'mma's grandson and is greatly influenced by her uncle Tridib in every way and superimposes his identity on his own. From him, the narrator learns about tropical snakes, Irish myths, Indian archeology and the London gossip. Tridib fires the boy's imagination with a longing to know, to experience and know the world not through passing the examinations but by the use of powerful and precise imagination.

Tridib had told him of the desire, real desire which was pure, painful and primitive that could carry one beyond the limits of one's mind to other places and other times and if one was lucky, even to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror. The narrator, as if almost by Divine revelation finds the house of Prices at Lymington Road in London unaided as he had conjured it up with concrete precision as Tridib and Ila had told him. This made Nick remark 'you are positively a mystic from the East. You have done it again.' In the same way narrator is able to tell about the inside of the house and lead his way himself until he finds a Cherry tree about which he had made a mention. Thus we find that Tridib had given him the worlds to travel in by telling him the stories and pointing out places in the Bartholomew's Atlas and had given him eyes also to see them with , so that long before the Narrator actually moves out of Calcutta his world had included Cairo, Madrid, Colombo etc. and he had infused life into them by his precise imagination.

In the beginning, he says Tridib went to England when he was eight, 'I have come to believe that I was eight too when Tridib first talked to me about the journey. I had decided that he looked like me'. Tridib becomes his mentor and guiding force. Despite his grandmother's disapproval of him and his ills, he stuck to him if not directly then furtively. Tridib has a shaping influence on him and has made him toe his line unconsciously. The narrator carries Tridib's talisman all through his life and wins wide appreciation for his remarkable power to see and imagine. He meets Tridib at the *adda* where he often used to come and the local lads would stick around him. He used to wield considerable influence over them because of his lively ways and enchanting personality and the narrator was thankful to him for the petty favours which his present secured for him. Narrator as a boy had not been more than a few hundred miles from Calcutta but had traveled infinite distance with Tridib in his room. He used to tell him about his experiences and stories and pointed

Notes

the places out on Bartholomew's Atlas. This brings him in direct contrast to Ila who though having visited a number of countries had not traveled at all except remembering worldwide string of departure lounges and the location of ladies toilets.

The narrator is undoubtedly blessed with a sharp memory and surprises all by telling the way to May's house without anybody's help and once inside; the location of the kitchen, staircase and the Cherry tree. Nick takes him to be an Oriental mystic.

Narrator is in love with his cousin Ila and this love remains unconsummated throughout. He is always admonished against relationship with her by his grandmother and at times even scolded. But the fact remained that he remained that he remained enchanted by her to a very great extent until her marriage with Nick Price. It was for this that Tha'mma wrote a letter to his Dean in Delhi complaining that he had been visiting the whores and should be, as a punishment, sent home.

When the narrator learns Tridib's nature of death and discusses the gruesome nature of the riots; to his great dismay he finds that the riots had disappeared from the collective memory of the public. They did remember the cricket match between India and England but nothing about the riots. The people were reveling in the euphoria of the war with China in 1962. They felt that India was going to teach the Chinese a lesson. To narrator's utter disbelief riots paled into insignificance in the wake of the greater evil-war. During the partition there were many Muslims who gave shelter to Hindus and hid them in their houses for weeks together at the cost of their life and the same thing happened on the other side as well. But they were ordinary people, soon forgotten. There were no Martyr's Memorials or Eternal flames for them. Both the Governments indulged in issuing the press statements for peace and communal harmony and remained unsung than that of butchery that lingered with ghastly memory. Narrator to his dismay finds that he is nothing but a chronicler of the people around him.

6.1.4 Tridib

Son of a high official in the foreign office who held string of important offices in India and abroad, he stayed in the big mansion along with his grandmother at Ballygungi in Calcutta as his father mostly stated out on foreign assignments. He is fond of reading and is a voracious reader and the room where he stays is full of files of them. His knowledge about snakes and circumcision rights of some of the desert tribes surprises the narrator. He has an attractive personality and at Gole bazaar *adda* which he frequents, he has a number of admirers who comprise the local lads. Though he does not cultivate a long lasting friendship or companionship for that matter with them, still whenever he visits, there is a big crowd of them around him. He is a versatile entertainer and though he cannot get started on his own career, has a high influence on the lives around him. People stick to him when he is around. He was pursuing a Ph.D. in Ancient Indian History on Sena dynasty of Bengal. He is a wizard who has powerful imagination and penetrating eyes. He has an uncanny ability to look beyond time and space. His imagination knows no boundaries. He falls in love with May who stays in London and despite the distance separating them their love is intense. Tridib's ideal is the story of Tristen, " a man without a country who fell in love with a woman across the seas—"This however, is also one of the themes of The Shadow Lines which Tridib covers with his love for May Price. He knows of no borders ad demarcations.

He has a shaping influence on the narrator who regards him as his mentor and guide. Narrator states that Tridib has given him worlds to travel in and eyes to see them with. Tridib has given him worlds to travel in and eyes to see them with. Tridib had often pointed out the places on the map and told him the stories in his room so that even before he had actually moved out of Calcutta, his world had expanded to include many places. He had already experienced and traveled without actually moving out. Like Tridib, narrator too possesses a strong imagination. His boyhood is filled with Tridib's London memories and his own visit there later is a reliving of the scenes and events of Tridib's experiences there. Though Tridib has got a strong imagination,

Notes

he never lived in the world of fantasy. He was much more contemptuous of fairylands than anybody else could be. He believed that we could not see without inventing what we saw.

However, he does not find favour with Tha'mma who wants that her grand child should not associate himself in any way with him. According to her, he is a loafer and a wastrel who does not do any proper work and lives off his father's money. He wasted his time, and for grandmother this was the biggest sin that any one could have committed. He was often spotted at Gole Bazaar *Adda* where he would be the center of attraction and would command the boys with his gossips. The wasted time began to stink according to her but narrator did not find Tridib's time, which could stink though he wasted it. Tha'mma believed that with his connections he could have got a high positions job and could have ruled the country like a lord. But he wasted his time in self-indulgence. Whatever the case may be, Tha'mma does like him in her own little way. Whenever he visited her house she went out of her way to give him a welcome by making an omelet herself that she rarely did for anybody else and made him comfortable. But she made it a point that he did not stay there for a long because a baneful object had the power of casting its influence even from a distance. Though he might not have been able to get started on his own career, he has a lot of influence on the lives of those around him. From Tridib, the narrator learns about snakes and Irish myths, about Indian archeology and London gossip. He fires narrator's imagination with a desire to know everything not by the middle class mentality of qualifying the examinations in good grades but by the use of his powerful imagination.

Tridib had told him of the desire that can carry one beyond the limit of one's mind to other times and other places and if one was lucky to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror. This strikes another theme of *The Shadow Lines* where the time and the distance are coalesced. The novel moves back and forth and the events do not follow sequentially.

Tridib had met May as a child in England when he had gone there to stay in 1940. Thereafter he had been sending Mrs. Price regular greetings but he sent a separate one for May when he was 27 and May 19. After the first three chatty letters, he writes a long and pornographic one giving an account of a child's view of a couple making love in war-torn London. He had expected May to meet — as a stranger in a ruin. He wanted them to meet as the completest of strangers—strangers across the seas. He wanted them to meet far from their friends and relatives— in a place without a past, without history, free, really free, two people coming together with the utter freedom of strangers. However, when May Price does come to visit him in India it results in his death, a tragedy.

Both Tha'mma and May are responsible for his tragic death as much as he himself is for his. He is a shy man who is able to write bold letters to May but on her arrival is like a young, diffident and shy by. The pangs of the violent death of his great grand uncle, the 90–year–old uncle of his mother would not move him when the mob runs after him but a few sarcastic, inciting words of May did. His male ego was prompted and he left the car to run after her. The zeal of Tha'mma to save her uncle from the trouble torn Dhaka and bring him to India despite the warnings given to her by Sahib brings her to her native place in Jindabahar Lane in old Dhaka. On their return they are surrounded by a mob when May Price unlocks the door of the car and runs out to save the old man from being cut to pieces.

It would be unfair to term his action as only rash. He must have had a determination, gravity and basic courage when he ran after May and pushed her and instead of pulling her back to the car, went forward and fell on the people's back to get to his grand uncle. He is cut from ear to ear. For a long time (17 years) May is not able to overcome this ghastly scene and accuses herself of his murder. She tells it to the narrator that if she had not got out of the car he would not have followed her and if only she knew what she was doing, the tragedy could have been averted. But later she changes her stand and says that nobody could have touched her as she was an English Memshahib, but he must have known he was going to die. Thus towards the end, May Price shifts the blame

Notes

on to Tridib himself and terms it as a sacrifice, which she cannot understand and must not try also because ' any real sacrifice is a mystery'. She invents this term and suffixes it to Tridib's nature of death.

6.1.5 May Price

May Price is a daughter of Tresawsen and is kind and simple. She is a student studying at the Royal College of Music and plays the oboe and joins and orchestra. She stays at 44 Lymington Road, London. She had got broad shoulders with average height and wasn't pretty. She had a strong face and a square jaw and her thick straight hair came down to her shoulders. She had a wonderful smile, which lit up her blue eyes and gave her quality of her own and set her apart. When the narrator visits her after 17 years of the Dhaka episode, he finds that she was exactly looking the same as he had seen her in Calcutta except that her shoulders had broadened for her height and had thickened; she seemed top heavy now and had not added an inch to her waist.

She earns her living by playing her organ in an orchestra though with a bored mechanical precision. Her income is not much but still she works for philanthropic causes and has joined a couple of small relief agencies, which provided housing for the survivals of an earthquake in Central America. She found great deal of satisfaction in her work and religiously collects money for her cause moving from road to road.

May becomes a victim of cultural dislocation when she comes to India and it sets the stage for personal and public tragedy. Her uncompromising humanitarian approach to humans and animals alike requires that she force Tridib while they are on the drive to stop and attend to a wounded dog on a highway. Tridib who is driving with May, and the narrator in the car ignores the plight of the dog and moves ahead but May takes a glimpse and forces him to stop and turn around. She herself slits the throat of the animal to relieve him of the pain. Tridib hesitant in the beginning but lends her the helping hand on seeing the energy and commitment of May Price for a stray dog. The same humanitarian stint comes to the fore when they are surrounded by a rioting mob in Dhaka; overriding all the concerns of the rest of the party she jumps out of the car to save the old man of 90 who is following them on the Rickshaw.

As a 19-year-old girl, May Price is curious and wide-eyed who gets fascinated by the sight of the cotton man twanging his long bow. She is so much delighted by his instrument that she asked the narrator to stop the cotton man for she would like to hear the sound of his instrument. She pays him Rs. five for that and he happily goes away. Another quality of May that shifts the spotlight on her is her kind and forgiving nature. In a drunken stupor narrator attempts to force himself upon her a couple of time on his drive from Lymington Road to May Price's apartment and finally does manage to tear off her brassiere but May pushes him out and forgives him the next morning when the narrator asks for pardon. She had quite loved him when she had visited India and took him along wherever she went.

6.1.6 Roby

The younger brother to Tridib and son of Sahib, a high profile diplomat is strongly built and is a favourite of Tha'mma for she believes that one cannot build a strong nation without building a strong body first. And she tells the narrator also that he is not like him; frail and thin.

Like his father, he had also traveled extensively but does not make a cultureless identity. He is very much Indian and tells Ila in Grand hotel when she insists on a dance; if not with them then with others, 'Girls don't behave like that here. You may do what you like in London. Here, there are certain things you cannot do. That is our culture; that is how we live', he quips. Strong as he is, he knocks down the businessman whom Ila selects for the dance and leaves the hall with her.

It was the same strength, conviction and a sense of morality, which made him rebel against the college union, and face them single handedly when they gave a call for strike over a student's

Notes

expulsion by the college authorities. The concerned student had asked a girl to walk up to his room for a cup of tea or some such thing. The students union was unanimous in calling for a strike but Roby alone in the whole college reused to go along with every one else. He did not argue or make speeches; he merely refused to attend the union meetings. And when some of the union leaders threatened to give him a beating, they found to their surprise that he was relieved at the prospect of settling the issue by a straightforward physical contest. Such was his standing in the college that eventually made the leaders call off the strike. For him a rule is a rule. If you break one you have to be willing to pay the price. He did not know the nitty-gritties of right and wrong but he had a certain sense, which told him about the morality. He certainly had his conscience or intuition, which led him directly to what he knew he ought to do.

The same thing he follows when as a collector he has to govern his district. He would tell the policemen, 'You have to be firm, you have to do your duty, you have to kill the whole village if necessary. We have nothing against the people; it is the terrorists we want to get. We have to be willing to pay a price for our freedom.' And often when he would get back home, he would find an anonymous note waiting for him saying' we are going to get you, nothing personal, we have to kill you for our freedom.' It would be like reading his own speech transcribed on a mirror. This concept of freedom baffles him a bit. 'Everyone is doing it to be free', he muses. In Assam, The North East, Punjab, Sri Lanka, Tripura—people shot by terrorists and separatists and the army and the police. One would find a single word behind all this, 'everyone is doing it to be free.' Even he wanted to be free of the scaring and horrible killing of his brother Tridib in the mob frenzy at Dhaka. But he couldn't. He also reinforces the theme of the novel, which was earlier state by Tha'mma: *can anyone divide a memory*? Perhaps none. If it were possible then Tridib's death would have done it; it would have set him free. That is, he would have forgotten him and the manner of his death but it is not the case. Fifteen years later thousands of miles away at the other end of the globe, a chance remark by a waiter in a restaurant about Jindabahar locality— the place where he was killed sets his hand shaking like a leaf.

6.1.7 Khalil

Justice would not be done if this character is not spoken about. Simple-minded, naive, short statured and jovial by heart, Khalil is not stupid as reported. His simplicity and love of mankind, which are rare these days, have given that impression though it is corrected in the novel itself. Khalil is a refugee from Murshidabad and has come to stay with Tha'mma's old uncle. The gentleman had given him space in his house so that others of his relations do not claim any rights in the house. However, it is he who takes to look after him in his old age. The years of service and care have taught him the old man's needs and his understanding. He is quite right to say that he wouldn't go. He takes him out on the plea of taking him to the court and himself dresses him up, even ties his shoelaces. He is simple-minded and loving in his care as well. He is a rickshaw puller and has got his wife and two small kids. He looks after the old man as if he were his own father. In the past years there has been trouble in that area and he has earned the rage of many a co-religionist for tending to a Hindu in the Muslim dominated locality. However, this does not deter him from looking after this old man.

Tha'mma comes to Dhaka to take her old uncle back to India but Khalil refuses to send him back. He is poor and manages with difficulty the two ends of life but is good enough not to discard the person who had given him the shelter. He cuts across all the lines that could isolate one man from another and the factors prompting divisions don't come to his mind. He becomes disheartened when Tha'mma insists on taking the old man back and the mechanic Saifuddin seconds her. He is at loss to think whom his two kids would address 'grandfather' . He gives his final nod only on the condition that if the old man does not feel comfortable in India he would be brought back. The cruel irony of fate however, does not let this innocent man live long and he is cut in the stomach

Notes

by the riotous mob and becomes a martyr to a good cause along with Tridib. His fate might be a doomed one but he continues of shine, though nobody makes any mention of him or has a word for his glorification.

Self-Assessment

1. Choose the correct option:

(*i*) Tha'mma was born in

(*a*) Dhaka (*b*) Jindabahar

(*c*) Calcutta (*d*) None of these

(*ii*) 'For your sake, for your freedom' said by

(*a*) Tha'mma (*b*) Tridib

(*c*) The Narrator (*d*) None of these

(*iii*) Ila is the grand daughter of

(*a*) Tridib (*b*) Tha'mma

(*c*) Maya Devi (*d*) None of these

(*iv*) Who is unnamed and undescribed?

(*a*) Tridib (*b*) Tha'mma

(*c*) The Narrator (*d*) None of these

6.2 Summary

- Commonly, there are two ways to portray the characters—one is direct or analytical and the second is indirect. In the first case, the novelist sketches his characters from the outside, dissects their passions, motives, thoughts and feelings, explains and comments on their acts. In the second case he stays out and his characters reveal themselves through their speech and action. The remarks, observations and judgments of other characters often make an enhancement in our understanding of them.
- The plot and characterization are always united in a novel. In some novels the interest of particular character(s) is uppermost and action is used mainly with reference to this and in the other one the plot is uppermost and characters are used mainly to carry out the action. When the plot and characterizations are brought out together harmoniously and logically it proves to be a success. In the novel(s) where the interest of the plot is uppermost, the personality of the actors often suffers and they are not given either the due weightage or importance. The plot has little or no reference to them and their case may be like that of puppets being pulled at will by the showman.

6.3 Key-Words

1. Punctilious : Showing great attention to detail or correct behaviour.
2. Philanthropic : Showing concern for humanity.

6.4 Review Questions

1. Briefly explain the characters in the Shadow Lines.
2. What is meant by charactarisation?
3. Give a character sketch of Tridib.

Notes

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (*i*) (*b*) (*ii*) (*a*) (*iii*) (*c*) (*iv*) (*c*)

6.5 Further Readings

Books

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4. The Oxford UP (India) – Delhi: Oxford UP, 1995 – edition contains 4 articles: Kaul, AN. "A Reading of *The Shadow Lines*." pp. 299-309.
5. Kaul, Suvir. "Separation Anxiety: Growing up Inter/National in *The Shadow lines*." pp. 268-286.
6. Roy, A. 2000. 'Microstoria: Indian Nationalism's "Little Stories" in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*,' *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 35:2 (2000), pp. 35-49.
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Notes

Unit 7: Amitav Ghosh: Shadow Lines—Narrative Techniques

CONTENTS

Objectives
Introduction
7.1 Narrative Techniques
7.2 Summary
7.3 Key-Words
7.4 Review Questions
7.5 Further Readings

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Discuss Narrative Techniques of Shadow Line.
- Analyse the Shadow Lines.

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines deals with political freedom in the modern world, nationalism and the shadow lines we people draw between us and nations. The line we have drawn is an absurd illusion. It is also a source of terrifying violence like a partition of India into Pakistan and Hindustan. The novel tells the story of the three generations of the narrator's family spread over Dhaka, Calcutta and London. He lines up characters from different nationalities, religions and culture in a close knit, palpable world.

7.1 Narrative Techniques

The story revolves around the narrator's search to find out about Tridib's death which the family wants to forget but the narrator cannot because Tridib was his mentor and had given him 'words to travel in' and 'eyes to see them with'. Through Tridib, the narrator learns using his imagination with precision. The novel also gives us the views of the various characters like Tha'mma, Ila, May, Jethamoshai and Robi and what boundaries mean to each of them.

Memory is the history that determines our perception of the present and our identity. Since we cannot change the history, it depends on us to choose the memory that suits our point of view.

But, the memories that we choose to forget are more important than the ones we choose to remember. This is what Amitav Ghosh is trying to communicate to the readers through this novel. The language used by the narrator is quite simple and easy to understand and the meaning of the text is beautifully conveyed, wherein lies the strength of the novel. The narrator also uses the technique of going back and forth in time which keeps the interest of the reader built in. Such moments are rare indeed these days when one takes a book in the hand and is completely captivated by it after reading the first few pages. That happened to me recently when I started reading "The Shadow Lines" by Amitav Ghosh.

Notes

"The Shadow Lines," Ghosh's second novel, was published in 1988, four years after the sectarian violence that shook New Delhi in the aftermath of the Prime minister, Indira Gandhi's assassination. Written when the homes of the Sikhs were still smouldering, some of the most important questions the novel probes are the various faces of violence and the extent to which its fiery arms reach under the guise of fighting for freedom. Ghosh's treatment of violence in Calcutta and in Dhaka is valid even today, more than ten years after its publication. What has happened recently in Kosovo and in East Timor show that answers still evade the questions which Ghosh poses about freedom, about the very real yet non-existing lines which divide nations, people, and families.

Much has been written about Amitav Ghosh's novels. "The Novels of Amitav Ghosh", edited by R. K. Dhawan was published this year by Prestige Books, New Delhi. If I find it necessary to say something more about Ghosh's writing it is because this novel moved me as none other did in the recent times.

Before that stage arrives the reader is catapulted to different places and times at breath taking tempo. The past, present and future combine and melt together erasing any kind of line of demarcation. Such lines are present mainly in the shadows they cast.

Notes The Shadow Lines is the story of the family and friends of the nameless narrator who for all his anonymity comes across as if he is the person looking at you quietly from across the table by the time the story telling is over and silence descends.

There is no point of reference to hold on to. Thus the going away - the title of the first section of the novel - becomes coming home - the title of the second section. These two titles could easily have been exchanged. The narrator is very much like the chronicler Pimen in Pushkin's drama Boris Godonow. But unlike Pushkin's Pimen this one is not a passive witness to all that happens in his presence, and absence. The very soul of the happenings, he is the comma which separates yet connects the various clauses of life lived in Calcutta, London, Dhaka and elsewhere. The story starts about thirteen years before the birth of the narrator and ends on the night preceding his departure from London back to Delhi. He spends less than a year in London, researching for his doctorate work, but it is a London he knew very well even before he puts a step on its pavements. Two people have made London so very real to him - Tridib, the second son of his father's aunt, his real mentor and inspirer, and Ila his beautiful cousin who has travelled all over the world but has seen little compared to what the narrator has seen through his mental eye. London is also a very real place because of Tridib's and Ila's friends - Mrs. Price, her daughter May, and son Nick. Like London comes alive due to the stories related by Ila and Tridib, Dhaka comes alive because of all the stories of her childhood told to him by his incomparable grandmother who was born there.

The tragedy is that though the narrator spends almost a year in London and thus has ample opportunity to come to terms with its role in his life, it is Dhaka which he never visits that affects him most by the violent drama that takes place on its roads, taking Tridib away as one of its most unfortunate victims. Violence has many faces in this novel - it is as much present in the marriage of Ila to Nick doomed to failure even before the "yes" word was spoken, as it is present on the riot torn streets of Calcutta or Dhaka. But the speciality of this novel is that this violence is very subtle till almost the end. When violence is dealt with, the idea is not to describe it explicitly like a voyeur but to look at it to comprehend its total senselessness.

Thus the way "violence" is brought into the picture extraordinarily sensitive: The narrator says, talking of the day riots tore Calcutta apart in 1964, "I opened my mouth to answer and found I had nothing to say. All I could have told them was of the sound of voices running past the walls of my

Notes

school, and of a glimpse of a mob in Park Circus." I have never experienced such a sound, but God, how these sentences get under the skin, how easy it is to hear that sound, how the heart beats faster on reading these sentences!

There are many other reasons why "The Shadow Lines" is so special a book. It has many of the characteristics that elevate a book to the level of unforgettable literature. First of all there is this simple language. These days when doing acrobatics with words and language has become equivalent to paving new directions in the literary scene, it is heart warming to read a book in which straight forward language is used to convey what the author wants to say. And what messages are conveyed, what new ideas are unearthed! I am one of those readers who likes reading because of the power inherent in words. Whenever I read a new book, I always hope that the book contains sentences and words - at least a couple of them - that illuminate the heart and mind for a long time after reading, sentences which simply make life easier to live. There is a treasure of such sentences to be discovered in "The Shadow Lines". For example, look at what Ghosh says about knowledge and ignorance: "...he knew the clarity of that image in his mind was merely the seductive clarity of ignorance; an illusion of knowledge created by a deceptive weight of remembered detail." And there is this most beautiful of all sentences I have read for a long, long time - "And yet, when I look at her (the grandmother), lying crumpled in front of me, her white thinning hair matted with her invalid's sweat, my heart fills with love for her - love and that other thing, which is not pity but something else, something the English language knows only in its absence - ruth - a tenderness which is not merely pity and not only love." It is this tenderness of feeling, this feeling of "ruth" of which the novel is so full of, which moves me. For all the violence that plays the central role in the novel, it is this abundant feeling of tenderness in the novel that the narrator feels for the people, for Tridib, for Ila, for the grandmother, for May, for Robi, that has remained with me. Ghosh is also a humorous writer. It is serious humour. Single words hide a wealth of meaning, for example, the way Tridib's father is always referred to as Shaheb, Ila's mother as Queen Victoria, or the way the grandmother's sister always remains Mayadebi without any suffix denoting the relationship. Also look at this passage that describes how the grandmother reacts on discovering that her old Jethamoshai is living with a Muslim family in Dhaka. "She exchanged a look of amazement with Mayadebi. Do you know, she whispered to Robi, there was a time when that old man was so orthodox that he wouldn't let a Muslim's shadow pass within ten feet of his food? And look at him now, paying the price of his sins." "Ten feet! Robi explained to May in hushed whisper, marvelling at the precision of the measurement. How did he measure? He whispered back at my grandmother. Did he keep a tape in his pocket when he ate?" "No, no", my grandmother said impatiently. "In those days many people followed rules like that; they had an instinct". "Trignometry!", Robi cried in a triumphant aside to May. "They must have known Trignometry. They probably worked it out like a sum: if the Muslim is standing under a twenty-two foot building, how far is his shadow? You see, we're much cleverer than you: bet your grandfather couldn't tell when a German's shadow was passing within ten feet of his food." As I read Robi's comments, I laughed, at first. Then I had to swallow hard at centuries old injustice these words were trying to hint at. Finally, another important reason the novel succeeds is because the main characters are very real, almost perfectly rounded. I specially love the grandmother. She is the grandmother many of us recognise. In her fierce moral standards, spartan outlook of life, intolerance of any nonsense - real and imagined, she is as real as any patriarch or matriarch worth the name. And there is this very loveable character of the narrator. It is that of a boy who warms your heart, it is that of a man who knows and has lost love - more than once in his life - and thus makes you feel like hugging him close to your heart. On all scores Amitav Ghosh's "The Shadow Lines" is a novel which must be read and re-read, thought about and discussed upon. It is a book that stays with the reader long after the last page has been turned and the light has been switched off.

How might Shadow Lines by Amitav Ghosh be considered a post colonial novel? looking at you quietly from across the table by the time the story telling is over and silence descends. Before that

Notes

stage arrives the reader is catapulted to different places and times at breath taking tempo. The past, present and future combine and melt together erasing any kind of line of demarcation. Such lines are present mainly in the shadows they cast. There is no point of reference to hold on to. Thus the going away - the title of the first section of the novel - becomes coming home - the title of the second section. These two titles could easily have been exchanged. The narrator is very much like the chronicler Pimen in Pushkin's drama Boris Godonow. But unlike Pushkin's Pimen this one is not a passive witness to all that happens in his presence, and absence. The very soul of the happenings, he is the comma which separates yet connects the various clauses of life lived in Calcutta, London, Dhaka and elsewhere.

The story starts about thirteen years before the birth of the narrator and ends on the night preceding his departure from London back to Delhi. He spends less than a year in London, researching for his doctorate work, but it is a London he knew very well even before he puts a step on its pavements. Two people have made London so very real to him - Tridib, the second son of his father's aunt, his real mentor and inspirer, and Ila his beautiful cousin who has travelled all over the world but has seen little compared to what the narrator has seen through his mental eye. London is also a very real place because of Tridib's and Ila's friends - Mrs. Price, her daughter May, and son Nick. Like London comes alive due to the stories related by Ila and Tridib, Dhaka comes alive because of all the stories of her childhood told to him by his incomparable grandmother who was born there. The tragedy is that though the narrator spends almost a year in London and thus has ample opportunity to come to terms with its role in his life, it is Dhaka which he never visits that affects him most by the violent drama that takes place on its roads, taking Tridib away as one of its most unfortunate victims. Violence has many faces in this novel - it is as much present in the marriage of Ila to Nick doomed to failure even before the "yes" word was spoken, as it is present on the riot torn streets of Calcutta or Dhaka. But the speciality of this novel is that this violence is very subtle till almost the end. When violence is dealt with, the idea is not to describe it explicitly like a voyeur but to look at it to comprehend its total senselessness.

Self-Assessment

1. Choose the correct options:

(*i*) The Shadow Lines is the story of the ..... .

(*a*) War (*b*) Family and Friend

(*c*) Politics (*d*) None of these

(*ii*) The story starts about ..... .

(*a*) Fifteen years before the birth of the Narrator

(*b*) Thirteen years before the birth of the Narrator

(*c*) After the assassinations of Indira Gandhi

(*d*) None of these

(*iii*) Mrs. Price is the daughter of ..... .

(*a*) May (*b*) Nick

(*c*) Tridib (*d*) None of these.

7.2 Summary

- The story revolves around the narrator's search to find out about Tridib's death which the family wants to forget but the narrator cannot because Tridib was his mentor and had given him 'words to travel in' and 'eyes to see them with'. Through Tridib, the narrator learns using his imagination with precision. The novel also gives us the views of the various characters like Tha'mma, Ila, May, Jethamoshai and Robi and what boundaries mean to each of them.

Notes

- The narrator also uses the technique of going back and forth in time which keeps the interest of the reader built in. Such moments are rare indeed these days when one takes a book in the hand and is completely captivated by it after reading the first few pages. That happened to me recently when I started reading "The Shadow Lines" by Amitav Ghosh.
- "The Shadow Lines," Ghosh's second novel, was published in 1988, four years after the sectarian violence that shook New Delhi in the aftermath of the Prime minister, Indira Gandhi's assassination. Written when the homes of the Sikhs were still smouldering, some of the most important questions the novel probes are the various faces of violence and the extent to which its fiery arms reach under the guise of fighting for freedom. Ghosh's treatment of violence in Calcutta and in Dhaka is valid even today, more than ten years after its publication. What has happened recently in Kosovo and in East Timor show that answers still evade the questions which Ghosh poses about freedom, about the very real yet non-existing lines which divide nations, people, and families.
- The Shadow Lines is the story of the family and friends of the nameless narrator who for all his anonymity comes across as if he is the person looking at you quietly from across the table by the time the story telling is over and silence descends. Before that stage arrives the reader is catapulted to different places and times at breath taking tempo. The past, present and future combine and melt together erasing any kind of line of demarcation. Such lines are present mainly in the shadows they cast.
- The story starts about thirteen years before the birth of the narrator and ends on the night preceding his departure from London back to Delhi. He spends less than a year in London, researching for his doctorate work, but it is a London he knew very well even before he puts a step on its pavements. Two people have made London so very real to him - Tridib, the second son of his father's aunt, his real mentor and inspirer, and Ila his beautiful cousin who has travelled all over the world but has seen little compared to what the narrator has seen through his mental eye. London is also a very real place because of Tridib's and Ila's friends- Mrs. Price, her daughter May, and son Nick.
- Thus the way "violence" is brought into the picture extraordinarily sensitive: The narrator says, talking of the day riots tore Calcutta apart in 1964, "I opened my mouth to answer and found I had nothing to say. All I could have told them was of the sound of voices running past the walls of my school, and of a glimpse of a mob in Park Circus." I have never experienced such a sound, but God, how these sentences get under the skin, how easy it is to hear that sound, how the heart beats faster on reading these sentences!
- Ghosh is also a humorous writer. It is serious humour. Single words hide a wealth of meaning, for example, the way Tridib's father is always referred to as Shaheb, Ila's mother as Queen Victoria, or the way the grandmother's sister always remains Mayadebi without any suffix denoting the relationship. Also look at this passage that describes how the grandmother reacts on discovering that her old Jethamoshai is living with a Muslim family in Dhaka. "She exchanged a look of amazement with Mayadebi. Do you know, she whispered to Robi, there was a time when that old man was so orthodox that he wouldn't let a Muslim's shadow pass within ten feet of his food? And look at him now, paying the price of his sins."
- How apt is the title of the novel "The shadow lines"? Contribution of colonialism in The shadow line. Comment- 'Postcolonial perspectives of Amitav Ghosh's Novels' Comment on the title of Amitav Ghosh's The Glass Palace? What is the significance of mirrors and reflections in the Shadow Lines? In what form does society appear in shadow lines? Can anyone point out instances in the book, Shadow Lines, where the author makes references to historical events character analysis of grandmother.
- How apt is the title of the novel "The shadow lines"? Contribution of colonialism in The shadow line. Comment- 'Postcolonial perspectives of Amitav Ghosh's Novels' Comment on

Notes

the title of Amitav Ghosh's The Glass Palace? What is the significance of mirrors and reflections in the Shadow Lines? In what form does society appear in shadow lines? Can anyone point out instances in the book, Shadow Lines, where the author makes references to historical events character analysis of grandmother. Which is a good passage to analyze from 'The Shadow Lines' by Amitav Ghosh for a class presentation?

7.3 Key-Words

1. Absurd illusion : Wildly unreasonable, illogical, or inappropriate.
2. Terrifying : Cause to feel extreme fear.

7.4 Review Questions

1. Examine the title of the novel Shadow Lines.
2. Could you please explain the idea of 'History, Politics and the Individual in the novels of Amitav Ghosh'?
3. What is a summary and character analysis of Shadow Lines by Amitav Ghosh?

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (*i*) (*b*) (*ii*) (*b*) (*iii*) (*a*)

7.5 Further Readings

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3. Dhawan, R.K. (ed.). 1999. *The Novels of Amitav Ghosh*, New Delhi: Prestige Books. James, Louis and Jan Shepherd. "Shadow Lines: Cross Cultural Perspectives in the Fiction of Amitav Ghosh." *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* (Dijon, France) 14:1 (Autumn, 1991): pp. 28-32.
4. The Oxford UP (India) – Delhi: Oxford UP, 1995 – edition contains 4 articles: Kaul, AN. "A Reading of *The Shadow Lines*." pp. 299-309.
5. Kaul, Suvir. "Separation Anxiety: Growing up Inter/National in *The Shadow lines*." pp. 268-286.
6. Roy, A. 2000. 'Microstoria: Indian Nationalism's "Little Stories" in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*,' *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 35:2 (2000), pp. 35-49.
7. Sundar Rajan, Rajeswari. "The Division of Experience in *The Shadow Lines*." pp. 287-298.
8. Mukherjee, Meenakshi. "Maps and Mirrors: Coordinates of Meaning in *The Shadow Lines*." pp. 255-267.
9. In Viney Kirpal, ed. *The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980's* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers Ltd.

Notes

Unit 8: Rupa Bajwa: Sari Shop—Introduction to the Text

CONTENTS

Objectives
Introduction
8.1 Sari Shop—Introduction to the Text
8.2 Summary
8.3 Key-Words
8.4 Review Questions
8.5 Further Readings

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Know about Rupa Bajwa.
- Discuss Sari Shop.

Introduction

Rupa Bajwa (b. 1977) hails from Armitsar, Punjab. Her debut novel *The Sari Shop* was longlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction 2004. **She** (born 1976 in Amritsar, India) is an Indian writer who lives and works in Amritsar, Punjab. In 2004, she published her first novel, *The Sari Shop*, which explores her hometown and the class dynamics of India. The novel won the writer flattering reviews, with reviewers calling her India's new literary find. *The Sari Shop* was long listed for the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2004. The novel won the XXIV Grinzane Cavour Prize for best first novel in June 2005, the Commonwealth Award in 2005 and India's Sahitya Akademi Award English 2006. Rupa Bajwa's second novel 'Tell Me a Story' has been released in April 2012. Again, some reviews are very good, but she has once again created controversy among the 'literary circles' in Delhi, since a part of her novel lampoons these very people. Currently, Rupa Bajwa is working on her third novel. The book has been wisely prepared in two parts, and the feel given to these two parts is so different that, even though there is a smooth and logical flow of happenings between the two, it could have easily been sold as two separate books! So, I thought it would make more sense to look at the two parts uniquely and review accordingly.

8.1 Sari Shop—Introduction to the Text

Ramchand, the protagonist, and all the main characters in the story, either work at or visit *The Sari shop* regularly. So the story has little to do with how the sari shop itself came into existence, or about its sales figures, or the number of varieties of silk-threaded draperies that the shop carries. All those people who scorned at the idea of having to read something that deals with boring saris, and moreover, Sari Shops-*come back*! It is definitely not a "chick flip". You can't but help getting reminded of the *Amol Palekar era of Hindi movies* reading the opening half of the book. There is this plain, simple-minded, lonely hero with a poignant past, his only company being his two colleagues: one, a mature, advice-giving family man, and another, a quick-witted carefree boy. The latter named **Hari**, has almost been sold out to the readers, by being presented as extremely adorable and cheerful; just like a comedian, who though crass and crude reaches out to the audience. The

Notes

parts where **Ramchand** pursuits for English-language education, his turmoil while encountering with a professor in the shop, the homework he does before visiting a royal customer's house, and the effort he puts in while sitting with his books, trying to make sense out of them- all form a very delightful read. However, towards the end of the first part, the story drags, becomes repetitive, and you wish the author would move on to unravel **Lakhan Singh**'s story, and also the mystery behind the woman who *drinks*. You also become impatient as the apparently-unimportant characters such as **Tina Kapoor** and **Bhimsen Seth** are pointlessly discussed extensively.

Ramchand had overslept, waking up only when the loud noises of a brawl in the street below had jolted him out of sleep. He rubbed his eyes, got out of bed and walked to the window. He peered through the rusted iron bars at the two people who were fighting. One was a milkman, who had been cycling back after delivering milk. He had large, zinc-coated iron cans (that looked like aluminium) strung on either side of his bicycle, and one of these now-empty milk cans had bumped into a pedestrian on the narrow street. A quarrel had flared up, and the two were shouting loudly, red-faced and angry. Ramchand sleepily brushed his teeth by the window, leaning against the wall. He watched the fight to its end, when the previously interested spectators began to get bored and calmed the two men down. It was just a ritual; people in street fights thought they lost face if they stopped before spectators intervened. The two finally went on their way. After that, Ramchand just forgot to watch the clock. He continued to stare vacantly out of the window for a long time, his mind still fuzzy with sleep. The morning was cold. His limbs and mind both felt frozen. He moved slowly.

By the time Ramchand looked at the little red clock on the table and realized that he was late, it was too late. He bathed and dressed in a hurry, dropping things all over the place, scalding himself when he warmed water for his bath on the kerosene stove, fumbling with the buttons of his shirt and spilling hair oil on the already dirty floor. Finally, he ended up misplacing the heavy iron lock, along with the key stuck in it. He found both right under his nose on the table after he had spent fifteen minutes searching for them everywhere. He rushed out of his room and made his way towards the shop then, half-running and half-walking through the narrow streets of the crowded bazaar, hurrying past pedestrians, dodging rickshaws and nearly running into vegetable carts. He could feel his toes perspiring inside his grey woollen socks.

Even at ten in the morning, the bazaar was throbbing with activity. The halwai was already installed in front of the Mishthaan Sweet Shop, pressing jalebi batter into squiggly shapes that floated and simmered in the oil in a big iron cauldron. All the shops had opened for the day and, Ramchand noted guiltily, all the shop assistants were already in place, trying to sell things with fixed, attentive smiles on their shiny, bathed faces. The older part of Amritsar, the original walled city, was full of bazaars — small ones that only the locals knew about, tiny bazaars that sold bangles and cloth very cheap but could be reached only on foot through tiny alleys; and the big, main bazaars where the streets were wider and the roads slightly cleaner. The bazaars of Amritsar were busy places where every day, throughout the year, transactions were made, prices were bargained over, shops were opened in the mornings and shut in the evenings. It was as if it had been so since the beginning of the world and would continue to be so till the end. There were no empty spaces. Just a jumble of old red-brick houses, aged grey concrete buildings, shops, signboards, numerous tiny temples at street corners and crowded streets thronged with people, cows, stray dogs, and fruit and vegetable carts. There were no gates, doorsteps led straight from the streets into houses. Crumbling buildings ran into each other like cardboard boxes stuck together with glue. Their terraces overlapped, there were no boundary walls — you couldn't tell where one finished and the next began. Occasionally there would be a gap in the mass of buildings, where a very narrow alley would nudge aside the unyielding walls and squeeze itself painfully through the solid structure, joining another similar narrow lane at some other end. It could take years to

Notes

become familiar with the maze-like network of lanes and alleys and short cuts in the old city.

Money, congestion and noise danced an eternal, crazy dance here together, leaving no moving space for other, gentler things. The actual walls that had once surrounded the city had fallen away long ago, but the ghosts of the wall still separated the old city from the newer one that flourished outside. The shop where Ramchand worked was one of the oldest in the city, tucked neatly between Talwaar Furnishings and Draperies and Chanduram's Fabrics. It was in one of the main bazaars, buried away in the heart of the city, yet with parking space for customers who came in cars. In this bazaar the shops were larger, older, with good reputations and old, regular customers, and the shop owners were all considered respectable people from old business families.

A large fading green signboard over the entrance of the shop said Sevak Sari House in flourishing red letters in old-fashioned calligraphy, both in English and Punjabi. The signboard was slightly misleading. The shop did not just sell saris. The ground floor stocked fabric for men's clothes as well. There were dreary browns, blues and blacks here. But very few people visited Sevak Sari House to buy Men's Suitings and Shirtings. There were other, larger shops that had a wider range devoted entirely to men — the Raymond showroom two lanes away, for instance. So the ground floor of the shop wore a dusty, jaded look. It was the first floor of the shop that sold saris. Packed from shelf to shelf with crisp Bangladeshi cottons, dazzling Kanjeevarams, Benaras silks, chiffons, crepes and satins, it was the first floor that pulsated with an intoxicating, rich life of colour and silk and brought in the customers and profits. And it was because of the huge success of the first floor that Sevak Sari House had been known for decades as the best sari shop in Amritsar. The suiting and shirting cut-pieces in the ground floor cowered under the sparkling, confident dazzle above.

There was also a second floor that customers never saw. It contained a big storeroom and a small toilet that was used by Mahajan and the shop assistants. Ramchand was one of the six shop assistants who worked in the sari section. Ramchand stood uncertainly at the entrance of the shop, his palms cold with sweat despite the chilly December morning, thinking of Mahajan's rage that would soon descend on him. Ramchand peered in. Mahajan was talking to somebody over the phone. Making the best of it, Ramchand sprinted across the ground floor under Mahajan's disapproving eyes.

There was a Ganesha idol installed near the foot of the staircase that led up to the first floor. Ramchand would usually stop before this idol for a moment every morning, with folded hands and closed eyes, and then after an elaborate bow, would make his way upstairs. But today he just hurried up the shaky wooden steps as fast as he could. His heart thudded inside his chest. Any moment now Mahajan would stop him and give him a dressing down. But he climbed up to the first floor safely. In the small space on top of the staircase, and in the front of the big glass door that led into the sari section, he tried to get his breath back. Then he struggled with his shoes, first hopping on one foot and then on the other, trying to get them. His hopping made thumping noises on the wooden staircase.

And then Mahajan finally bellowed from below. 'Trying to break the place? Coming late? You think I don't notice? Am I blind? Stupid? Hunh? You think a shop can be run like this? You will come and go as you please? Are you a king or something? Raja Ramchand? Should we send an entourage and a bagghi to pick you up every day?' Ramchand stopped immediately and waited. Silence. Then he cautiously took of his shoes, washing his feet wouldn't smell so. He had taken a bath and worn fresh socks, and yet . . . He knew that the smell would become even stronger by the end of the day. Ramchand arranged his shoes neatly on the wooden shoe rack on the side of the wall, in the row assigned to the shop assistants. The other rows were for the delicate sandals, the kolhapuri chappals, the platform and stiletto heels of the female customers. Ramchand patted his

Notes

hair and straightened his kurta to make up for the feet, and walked in. He went to his allotted place and sat down cross-legged. The shop was an old-fashioned one and there were no counters. The entire floor space was spread out with thick mattresses covered with white sheets, and on these mattresses sat the shop assistants every day, facing the customers, and endlessly rolling and unrolling yards upon yards of important coloured fabric.

'Namaste Ramchand Bhaiya. Late again?' grinned Hari, sitting some distance away. Hari was the youngest among all the shop assistants. He was a careless, cheerful, young man with a cheeky face, who often got shouted at by Mahajan. However, unlike the effect they had on Ramchand, these unpleasant encounters always left Hari completely unfazed. In fact, on slightly dull days, they even cheered him up. 'In from one ear, and out from the other,' he would always say, beaming broadly, after Mahajan had spent considerable time and energy telling him what he thought of him. Because of Hari's junior status, his inexperience and his indifference to the intricacies of fabric, he had been put in charge of Paraag Daily Wear Saris and Paraag Fancy Saris for Occasions. One didn't need much skill or specialized knowledge of fabric to sell these. It would be a long time before Hari would be put in charge of anything else. Not that he cared. Ramchand smiled back at him. 'What to do, yaar?' 'We could hear him shouting at you even through the door,' Hari said, still grinning. 'What to do, yaar?' Ramchand said again, this time more gloomily. 'Never mind,' said Hari comfortingly. 'You did a good deed for our Mahajan. If some people don't get to shout at someone early in the morning, they can't digest their breakfast properly. Now that raakshas Mahajan will have very good digestion.' Hari cackled at his own joke. 'For that is the sort of man our Mahajan is,' he added, winking at Ramchand, and cackled again. Then he sighed theatrically.

Gokul sat placidly folding some saris into neat rectangles. He was in charge of very expensive crêpes, and in the wedding season he also helped with ornate wedding lehngas and saris. He was a grave-looking man in his forties who took his work very seriously. Mahajan thought a great deal of his experience and his sincerity, but this still didn't save Gokul from occasional tongue lashes from Mahajan. About ten years back, Sevak Sari House had also decided to stock chunnis. For there were many Sardaarnis from old Sikh families, matriarchs as well as young women, who came in to buy saris and asked hopefully whether they had chunnis as well. For them, saris were necessary, they were fashionable, but their real clothes were salwaar kameez. And so, after many of them had wistfully enquired about chunnis, saying that Sevak Sari House was so dependable, and that it was so difficult to get really good quality stuff in chunnis these days, Bhimsen and Mahajan had put their heads together and had decided to stock chunnis too.

And Gokul had made it his business to know his chunnis very well. There were no ordinary chunnis in Sevak Sari House. They sold saris, so if some chunnis had to be there, they had to be special. All of them were two and a half metres in length, and of the required width. No well-dressed sardaarni liked a chunni shorter or narrower than that; they thought that those kind of chunnis were for Hindu women or for very young girls. Apart from the length, the quality was taken care of. There were pure chiffon chunnis, there were lovely white silk chunnis that could be dyed to match any silk salwaar kameez, there were gold-edged bridal odhnis in red, pink and maroon, there were white chunnis with discreet light-coloured embroidery at the borders for widows from good families, there were the colourful ones embroidered with traditional phulkari work — usually bought by Sikh women for their daughters' trousseau, and many others. And Gokul could handle all the customers who came in asking for chunnis. Despite this, Gokul didn't swagger. He was in awe of Mahajan and was always warning Hari to be careful not to get into Mahajan's bad books.

Notes

Gokul now looked up at Hari and said, 'You be quiet, Hari! Calling Mahajan a raakshas at the top of your voice! You talk too much. Some day they will hear you and chuck you out. You have too long a tongue. That tongue won't earn you your living, boy.' But Gokul was smiling when he said this. He had a small, benign face and a dome-shaped head sparsely covered with wisps of hair. Ramchand also gave him a wan smile. Chander was unlocking a cupboard nearby. All the walls of the shop were either covered with shelves, or had sturdy built-in cupboards that could be locked up with the more expensive or delicate stock inside. While the three were talking, Chander didn't even look up once. He was a quiet man, very tall, and with a very pronounced Adam's apple. He often did not turn up for work, and maintained a melancholic silence whenever Mahajan shouted at him for this or for any other reason. He would just take in all the insults Mahajan hurled at him, staring into space all the while, biting his lower lip, not answering any of Mahajan's angry questions.

The two oldest shop assistants, Shyam and Rajesh, had been working at Sevak Sari House for a much longer time than any of the others. Shyam had greying hair, a thin face and a large gap between his two front teeth. Rajesh was plump, with slightly rheumy eyes. The two kept to themselves, confabulating in low voices about the rising prices, nought per cent interest home loans and where you could get the best bargains for household electrical appliances. They were paid slightly more than all the other shop assistants. Everyone knew this, but it was never mentioned, and the two men never admitted it officially. Shyam had a young daughter he was hoping to marry off to Rajesh's son. They lived in their own set, middle-aged world, went out for tea and meals together, and called all the other shop assistants 'boys', even Gokul, who was only a few years younger than them.

Did u know? *The Sari Shop* revolves around the anxieties of Ramchand, a lowly shop assistant at Sevak Sari House in Amritsar. Ramchand was not born poor. His parents are killed in an accident and he is brought up by his uncle.

Ramchand spent the morning arranging new stock. Bhimsen Seth, the owner of the shop, came in at about eleven. The shop had been set up by his grandfather, Sevak Ram. Bhimsen had taken over at the age of twenty. That was when a fifteen-year-old Mahajan had come to him looking for work. Bhimsen had taken him in, and Mahajan had worked his way up in the business. He had, over thirty years, proved himself to be honest, reliable, enterprising and a hard taskmaster. Now it was Mahajan who looked after most of the practical affairs of the shop, though under Bhimsen's supervision. Most of the time now, Bhimsen Seth didn't need to come to the shop every day. He had some other businesses running that he also had to see to. Ramchand didn't know whether Seth was his surname or if it was just a respectful way of addressing him. He had asked Gokul once, but Gokul didn't know either, and Ramchand didn't dare to ask anyone else. On the rare occasions that Bhimsen Seth did come to the shop, he just reclined prosperously in a corner of the first floor, surrounded by a garish assortment of pictures of Hindu Gods, burning incense sticks and greedily counting hundred rupee notes with his thick, stubby fingers. Ramchand watched him out of the corner of his eye sometimes. Bhimsen would intently flip the edges of the notes, and, if he happened to look up and catch Ramchand's eye, he would give him a slow, fleshy smile that chilled Ramchand's heart. He always found Bhimsen's benevolent manner a little sinister.

Notes

Self-Assessment

1. Choose the correct options:

(*i*) Rupa Bajwa's second novel Tell me a story has been released in April ..... .

(*a*) 2012 (*b*) 2008

(*c*) 2007 (*d*) 2002

(*ii*) Sari Shop was Bajwa's ..... Novel.

(*a*) Second (*b*) Third

(*c*) Fourth (*d*) First

(*iii*) The protagonist of the Novel Sari Shop ..... .

(*a*) Hari (*b*) Ramchand

(*c*) Lakhan Singh (*d*) None of these

(*iv*) The Sari Shop was listed for Orange Prize in ..... .

(*a*) 2000 (*b*) 2002

(*c*) 2005 (*d*) 2009

8.2 Summary

- It was a well-crafted book, it began and ended well, the chapters flew seamlessly into each other. There was a good streak of humour running through it. It received favourable reviews in the press… goes the description given by the author about one of her characters, **Rina Kapoor**'s book. Coincidentally, this could be the perfect account of the first part of the novel, that too, in the author's own words.
- *The Sari Shop* revolves around the anxieties of Ramchand, a lowly shop assistant at Sevak Sari House in Amritsar. Ramchand was not born poor. His parents are killed in an accident and he is brought up by his uncle. As soon as Ramchand is old enough to fend for himself his uncle finds him a job as a shop assistant where he is condemned to a life of ennui and drudgery and far from the education he craves so much. But all this changes suddenly when he is dispatched to the rich, English-speaking Kapoor household to deliver saris and fabrics for the daughter's trousseau. Seeing them converse in English, Ramchand's passion gets re-kindled and he buys himself a second-hand grammar book, an Oxford Dictionary, a fresh pair of socks and a bar of Lifebuoy soap. These four things, he is convinced, will give him the kind of life he has wanted since childhood.
- The novel captures the essence of Amritsar with all its gossip, its alleys, its busy bazaars, its eateries, mannerisms and its petty rivalries among the rich and bored women. RAMCHAND, a shop assistant in Sevak Sari House in Amritsar, spends his days patiently showing yards of fabric to the women of "status families" and to the giggling girls who dream of dressing up in silk but can only afford cotton. When Ramchand is sent to a new part of the city to show wares to a wealthy family preparing for their daughter's wedding, he is jolted out of the rhythm of his narrow daily life. His glimpse into a different world gives him an urgent sense of possibility. He begins to see himself, his life, and his future more clearly. And so he attempts to recapture the hope that his childhood had promised, arming himself with two battered English grammar books, a fresh pair of socks, and a bar of Lifebuoy soap. But soon these efforts turn his life upside down, bringing him face to face with the cruelties on which his very existence depends.

Notes

- A poignant tale of a sari shop its customers and more importantly the salesmen and their lives. Ramchand is a timid young man who goes about doing his job quietly and trying to fulfill his dead parents' ambition of learning English. He buys books to teach himself English and feels he has died and gone to heaven when he is sent to the Kapoor Mansion to hawk saris. Alas! He also sees the wretchedness that is his co-worker Chander's life. Tragedy makes him erupt into an angry young man but only till his anger is dissipated - a few days and life is back to 'normal."

8.3 Key-Words

1. Lampoon : Satirize, a speech or text criticizing someone or something in this way: "does this sound like a lampoon of student life
2. Poignant : Evoking a keen sense of sadness or regret: "a poignant reminder", Keenly felt: "the sensation was most poignant in winter".

8.4 Review Questions

1. Explain Rupa Bajwa as a novelist.
2. Briefly introduce Sari Shop by Rupa Bajwa.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (*i*) (*a*) (*ii*) (*d*) (*iii*) (*b*) (*iv*) (*c*)

8.5 Further Readings

1. Bajwa, Rupa. 2004. The Sari Shop. New Delhi: Penguin.
2. Johnson, Harry M. An Introduction to Sociology.
3. Khushwant Singh. 2004. This Above All. The Tribune.
4. Lodge & Wood. 2003. Modern Criticism & Theory. Pearson Education.
5. Rege, Sharmila. 2003. Sociology of Gender. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Notes

Unit 9: Rupa Bajwa: Sari Shop—Concept of Feminism

CONTENTS

Objectives
Introduction
9.1 Sari Shop—Concept of Feminism
9.2 Summary
9.3 Key-Words
9.4 Review Questions
9.5 Further Readings

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Introduce Rupa Bajwa's the Sari Shop.
- Understand the Concept of Feminism.

Introduction

Rupa Bajwa's "The Sari Shop" set in the little city of Amritsar captures evocatively, the social atmosphere of small-town India. Her narrative encapsulates the spirit of the sari-shop environment with its spirited, intimate, interaction between shop personnel and regular patrons. In the background, the rustling silk, soft cotton and shiny synthetic saris reach out to us so realistically that we long to hold and caress them in our hands. Apart from that, the unplumbed pathos of Ramchand, an assistant in Sevak Sari Shop, whose world revolves around selling saris to the women customers, deadens our heart with sorrow. Ramchand's life and his isolation in the indifferent world are effortlessly carved out in fine detail. Is it surprising then, we are drawn to empathize with his empty, monotonous existence?

Ramchand's loss of his doting parents at a tender age is very moving. He is forced into menial work by his uncle who grabbed his inheritance. His desire to master English language is noteworthy, as it is rekindled one day, when he is sent to display sarees for the trousseau of a wealthy man's daughter. Suddenly, his life seems to acquire a purpose as he meticulously sets about learning new English words from "Radiant Essays" and "A Complete Writer" assisted by an old Oxford English dictionary. As he reads, he seems to grasp the meaning of his life and the avidity of life around him. It was a sad moment, when he began to understand the pathos of the underdog and the aggression of the conqueror; in this case the one on top of the social hierarchy. The transformation in Ramchand is to make him humane to the hurts of society and the woes of the secondary sex, women. Kamala, the wife of another sari shop assistant Chander, inadvertently opens his eyes to the double standards lived by men in the patriarchal society. At the end of it, Ramchand realizes the futility of trying to turn the system around and instead, finds comfort in lapsing into his routine existence. Our journey is outward with Ramchand, into the stagnant, oppressive social system and inward with him into his suffocating, futile ruminations. I could only throw up my hands in utter despair, at the futility of it all, when nothing materialized. I wished that Ramchand would have persevered.

The characterization in the novel I feel is pertinent to the trivial rivalries that seethe beneath the surface of life lived by petty traders and class-conscious, middle-class wives. The wives of rich industrialists with their empty lives and the educated class with their snobbish intellectualism, is

Notes

skillfully caricatured. The lives of the lower middle class, their resigned acceptance of poverty, their escape into filmi world and their aspirations to higher things through English speaking jobs, brought a lump into my throat due to the streak of desperation that intertwined hope.

I found wonderfully comical moments in the novel as, when Hari, another shop assistant imitates the portly shop owner or when Ramchand sneaks into the wealthy wedding reception to taste the forty desserts set out on the table or his surprise when he sees all the women customers and the sarees from the shop on them. The laugh aloud moments are, when I took in the spiteful chatter of the ladies on a saree buying spree or observe Ramchand's sensual day dreams revolving around Sudha, the young wife of his landlord or see him ticking off his shop manager in a perfectly structured droll English or view his attempts to combat his smelly feet with lemon juice. It is laughter mixed with pathos, when I glimpsed Rina interviewing Ramchand to exploit his naïve, comical appeal in her debut novel, while Ramchand imagines himself as suave with Rina.

Is it not utter duplicity of the world where law exists for the rich while the poor timidly accept injustice? The brutal rape of Kamala, the involvement of the rich Guptas, the apathy of the educated, articulate and empowered Mrs Sachdeva, the police who pocket the bribe and punish the victim, the anguish of Ramchand who is just a bystander, left a lasting impression on me. Ramchand's new found perception, battles to bring some order into the skewered justice system in the society. His sanity rightfully takes a beating, withdraws into insanity with the intensity of its demoralization and returns to the present deceitful world to maintain its status quo. I honestly salute Ramchand's efforts, even though brief, to challenge the social hierarchical system of rich and poor.

Ramchand's attempts to imbue his life with some imagination and beauty by buying English books and trying to educate himself is very moving. At that particular moment, I recalled the mania of the Indians for the English language and their use of it as a benchmark to judge a person's knowledge and place in community. I believe, the novel is very perceptive in giving a social commentary of the society which reflects the existentialist torment of every human creature. At the same time, there is a fine balance between reality and expectation, as the incongruities of life is deftly woven into the story,

I found the novel darkly humorous as it effortlessly drew me into the lives of the characters as they go about their business of living. I feel, without our volition we can empathize with Kamala or Ramchand or sneer at the hollowness of Rina or Mrs Sachdeva. It may not possible for us to break out of our boundaries or change the world around us but sometimes it is necessary to just try and understand ourselves and our life. The novel definitely does that. Kudos to Bajwa for her sensitive effort...

Geetha Kariappa is a research scholar with her area of interest being "Feminist Criticism." She is actively involved in the field of Education and Softskills as a teacher and a trainer. She loves reading fiction, short stories and books on travel. She has written literary articles for many literary journals.

9.1 Sari Shop—Concept of Feminism

Rupa Bajwa has woven an intricate tale of the protagonist Ramchand trying to lift himself from the dregs of his lonely existence, by engaging with the people he meets on a more real level. Unfortunately he finds the phrase “two sides of the coin” to be true to almost all situations in life, where hope and desperation co-exist. Ramchand is ‘everyman’-living in a small tenement in one of the by lanes of Amritsar. The contrasting strands of the life of the privileged and the plodding existence of the poor are like the weft and weave of the saris that are sold by Ramchand. Somehow threads interweave to create saris but a few crystals sewn in, or a shot of sari woven through can make a dramatic difference. It almost seems that Ramchand will lighten his dark lonely days with his efforts at self improvement. Ramchand for all his feeling of being unschooled, has studied that

Notes

special language that women speak when they shop and is good at his job at the Sevak Sari House. He is inspired to make a few changes to his dull existence after a glimpse into the life of the rich. But the consequences are quite the opposite! Ms. Bajwa has a crafted an honest narrative of a town in modern India, replete with the heartbreak of humdrum existence.

Feminist enterprise has been so far a long struggle to universalize female behaviour, their common tales of woe and sufferings under realms of patriarchy and male oppression. Be it a question of rewriting of male texts or parametering of social structure, the set pattern of feminist view point has been struggle against androcentric ethics and female sensitivity in bonding, analysing and understanding each other universally. Nowhere have women been set against women, only men have been peeled, chopped and even roasted in certain instances.

In Indian context, the fashion in writing and criticism, pertains to this noveau feminism in vocal, visual and literary form. Rupa Bajwa, the young girl from Amritsar and brave I must say, has dare set in a different view point with her text, The Sari Shop. The title itself is a potent symbol of Indian womanhood and all traditional and modern idiosyncrasies associated with it. This is Rupa Bajwa's debut work, and she bangs in a time when Jhumpa Lahiri, Shani Motoo, Anita Nair and other young brigade is all over the scene. But she has a different identity of a small town like Amritsar, an image like Sari to unfurl, and a separate story than immigrant culture tale, and a separate woman to portray- an Indian woman, a wounded woman, a raped woman, a woman who dares against women, woman who assumes the status of an actual heroine/ role model when she pulls down glitters from fabrics of rich and suave feminist minds by poking fun at their miserableness of being hollow inside. Bajwa has presented in all its nakedness the common psychic inheritance of Indians' regarding women and the psychic makeup of women in general.

The continuous assessment all over the world has been of women as important as men but no evaluation of women' position in society with other women. The enigma of plural societies like India, which face more social, political and cultural cleavages, is complex and uneasy to differentiate.

The feminisation of media especially T.V. has brought a new cult of upper upper or upper middle class bourgeois woman, obliterating our mind of the crude statistics of women facing unto untouchability, oppression, below poverty line (bpl status), unemployment graphs, illiteracy or ignorance factors, rising suicides, molestation, violence, rape etc etc

The embellished make believe world has bypassed our awareness of internal and external social system in terms of caste, creed, race, colour, ethnicity, religion and now with emerging social class. Though class in Indian context is not a new signifier, but Is the Indian writer in English especially woman writer aware of interclass struggle, class division, class oppression, class-consciousness and class solidarity among women themselves? The uniformity of biological status among women can't ignore rational, social, political and economic differences, where she is a different class from the other. So, there are 'fault lines' emerging among perceived feminist notions and theories, the fancied 'equality manifesto' not with men but with women in general seems itself 'unequal' in theory and reality. The Sari Shop is a work where representations of different Indian woman is given due analyses on the basis of numerous hybrid and heterogeneous class groups. The rationalisation of status and class adds to discrimination between and women and women and is discussed in terms of dominant and subordinate category. Frank Parkin has observed in the book 'Sociology of Gender':

"For the great majority of women the allocation of social and economical rewards is determined primarily by the position of their families and, in particular, that of the male head. Although women today share certain status attributes in common, simply by virtue of their sex, their claims over resources are not primarily determined by their own occupation but, more commonly, by that of their fathers or husbands. And if the wives and daughters of unskilled labourers have something in common with the wives and daughters of wealthy landowners, there can be no doubt that the differences in their overall situation are far more striking and significant. Only if

Notes

the disabilities attaching to female status were felt to be so great as to override differences of a class kind would it be realistic to regard sex as an important dimension of stratification."

The delineated female characters in Sari Shop are better halves of someone rich and famous or somebody affluent and known. They are no entities in themselves. The novelist has called them all Mrs Sachdeva/ Kapoor/ Bhandari/ Gupta or the other. They have no name and identity of their own. It is all borrowed from husband's hierarchy and tradition. The feminist concern should embark on this hired 'image-identity bargain' of upper-upper class woman. For Kamla, the drunk, mad , ruffian sari assistant Chander's wife the title is not Mrs. Chander anywhere but Chander's wife or that charred Kamla, 'the mad woman in the attic' kind.

Bajwa introduces a gallery of female characters, all distinct and apart in style, language, mannerism, ideology and in particular how they choose a sari, admire its texture, colour and fabric and fancy it wearing them. Mrs Sandhu wife of a chief engineer in Punjab State Electricity Board , epitomises 'power psychology' "as her rolls of fat jiggled as she waddled" into her spotless house, furnished with latest gadgetry and fashionable architectural feature. Her picture perfect frame is summed up as " A beautiful house, status family, a caring husband and good looks... what more could a woman ask for."

Mrs Gupta the wife of a wealthy industrialist sits in her bedroom on a large bed covered with a peach satin bedspread, reminding of the "burnished throne" (A game of chess, The Waste land, T.S. Eliot). Her unusual, 'perky' and 'over confident manner' smelled through her room beaming of various loreal cosmetics, lakme, and her recent venture with feng shui, established her as another consumerist character. Mrs Sachdeva, Head of the English Deptt. at a local college, "liked to look plain and businesslike". She felt she "wasn't one of the idle housewives that this city was so full of. She was a literate woman" after all.

Mrs Bhandari, wife of the DIG of Police, who took pride in calling herself a 'social activist', 'spoke perfect English, had an unerring taste in clothes and any party that she organized was bound to be success.' was another straw brilliantly sketched by Bajwa. And then rich Ravinder Kapoor's wife and daughter, who had at one go, bought pashmeena shawls worth 10 lakhs, had enough of money and poise to astonish any millionaire in the town.

The personal likings and dislikings of women also rest on these social gimmicks. Mrs Kapoor dislikes Mrs Sachdeva the 'ordinary professor-type service class' women, coming to their mansioned house. Mrs Sandhu finds Mrs Bhandari 'snooty', may be because 'her English is so good', but her heaven of peace lies in the fact that 'Bhandari's are certainly not very rich and have only daughter still not married.'

The social nature of women is exposed in the eyes of Ramchand at times narrator, sufferer and omniscient observer with critical eye of a psychologist who peeps into their minds, hypocrisies, values and life style for "he had watched innumerable women choose saris He had seen variety, he had seen envy he had seen despair. He knew well the bitterness of a plain woman wordless triumph of the beautiful ones".

He finds in Mrs. Kapoor "a certain ruthlessness in the way she picked up a sari, ran a sharp eye a sharp eye over it and had glint in eyes before making up mind".. Among the various sari images created by the author, the imagery used in describing women of different classes picking up the right sari is amazing to see. And in all the cases, Ramchand is made to observe and feel the things, sometimes with Prufrockian uneasiness and sometimes with moralisings of Tiresias.

Mrs Sachdeva the literate woman, Head of an English Department, likes dullish colours in choosing a sari, symbolic of her argument to stay apart from homogenisation with other females. The gorgeously decked up Rina Kapoor as bride dazzles Ramchand with her laughter and the way she sweeps the marble staircase regally with her bridal outfit leaves him spellbound.

Notes

The sari imagery reflects both beauty and ugliness of life real and reel. The 'rust red, blood red stains on Kamla's purple sari' and vomit stains on her blouse after her rape and violence become a profound motive for Ramchand to avenge her wrong. The sari image is convulsed, decontrolled and deconstructed with masterly superbness & intensity of pathos. After Kamla's death, the place inside the sari shop turned claustrophobic and grave, saris flew out at Ramchand whipping around 'engulfing him like a shroud' its black border suffocating him as if coercing him to take stock of situation and bear the burden of a saviour, a role which nature had imposed on him. Marxist/ socialist feminism rests on the creed of woman as tertiary consumer and primary producer in society, be it producing offspring in the womb or cooking and cleaning or reproducing and writing. The theorization and over theorisation has destabilized the whole system of study and epistemology, regarding women. The debate has rested more on patriarchy in every form and subordination of woman by it. Women's rights, demands and desires have reverberated all the corners by now. Rape, violence, prejudice and household inequities have become highly contested issues among women on behalf of women. The cumulative effect of publicising deficiency in social system for deprived women by affluent and economic advancement by few has generated a 'cultural lag' between the two, in which the basic values are eroded or changed for two groups and practically even in the name of feminism no cultural and intellectual intermixing is viable.

I see this onslaught of global capitalist consumerist culture on Indian scene in light of Rupa Bajwa's Sari Shop, which is a fine mimicking of welfare feminism. The class solidarity among opulent group of Mrs. Sandhu, Mrs Sachdeva, Mrs. Kapoor and types is empowered by class consciousness which they feel and generate by ignominious and condescending values to 'have nots'. The Sari Shop explains the meaning of existence in spheres of capitalism, chaos and conflict, when women themselves have fell a prey to consumerism. In the words of Ram Chand, the shop assistant :

"Life was grubby, clumsy, mean, flabby and meaningless.. Sick, sick, sick," (The Sari Shop, pp 111) enough to remind Burning Burning Burning Burning of Eliot's waste land. The Sari of Indian woman is exploited maximum as a potent metaphor, a vehicle for all kind of feminine expression. Sari is a symbol of womanhood and courtesy, but it also constraints their movements and gait, providing a negative implication of concept and The Sari Shop would be a fit and plausible metaphor of restricted and reserved life, compartmentalized thoughts, associated with various women groups, a fine camouflage behind which all the actual selves remain mystified. Hordes of women visited it daily, some as a part of routine activity which ended in cheap shopping bout at sari shop, some for weddings and parties, some need not visit, they could pedal saris some like Kapoors or some occasional visits by sombre lecturers like Mrs Sachdeva etc. The idiosyncrasies and oddities of women in choosing a sari or touching it brings out their common shared shopping idiocy. The pervading tone of buying, bargaining and spending sums a bizarre sentiment of meaninglessness in life, which Ramchand feels as "Money. Congestion and noise danced an eternal, crazy dance here together, leaving no moving space for other gentler things." (Sari Shop, pp, 5) The remarkable thing is why only Ramchand, the traditionally unfair male protagonist is forced into the situation, to save, revolt and protest moved by helplessness and misery of the rape victim. For it is Ramchand who instead of getting numbed by social pressure and worldliness remarks, " What constant injustice! What a warped way of living! How wrong it all was! He felt reckless, strong enough to do anything, fight anyone for justice, for truth." (Sari Shop pp 222) The two women rich, intellectual and powerful Ramchand chooses to narrate Kamla's story for 'more importantly they were women' are enraged by 'the whole ugly, sordid, jigsaw story.' This breakdown of gynocentric world in which women can't live in perfect harmony and friendship with each other for their double standards or sub standards is alarming! Mrs. Sachedeva pushes away the Saris on her lap and speaks in clenched teeth, "I don't want to listen to all that rubbish again that too in Hindi. How dare you, tell me filthy stories about the kind of women you seem to know". Thus, women overdo and cut each other to size, especially the pearl faced, upper-upper

Notes

intelligentsia who find bonding with women of their class only, and not with women of Ramchand's social class type. The gynocentric view is made complete by shooting arrows not only in the direction of men, but also women who are mimicked for their false Anglo-rational feminist, ideals adored and adopted so naturally only to turn deaf to the cries of a marginalized soul for help. A woman is oppressed by women for their tacit understanding of not understanding her plight. Kamla is belied, betrayed and berated by class of her own sex whereas a lone male cries for her existence, her voice, emotion and identity.

Kamla the wronged, robbed, and raped women becomes a symbol and prototype of emancipation and individuality, though, she says and does things theatrically in a Schizophrenic manner, but it is the will of weaker woman, which overrules the high handedness of society ladies. The quagmire of assaults she bears throws a neon light on abyss of women's agony at the hands of women, envisioning true feminist to embark on a revolutionary struggle in terms of class conflict among women. Thus a better study lies in giving micro attention to axis of social constructs intertwined with gender and synthesising feminist dogmas with socio-cultural dimensions.

Self-Assessment

1. Fill in the blanks:

(*i*) "The Sari Shop" set in the little city of ..... .

(*ii*) Geetha Kariappa is a research scholar with her area of interest being ..... .

(*iii*) She is actively involved in the field of Education and Softskills as a ..... .

(*iv*) Ramchand is an ..... in Sevak Sari Shop.

9.2 Summary

- Rupa Bajwa has woven an intricate tale of the protagonist Ramchand trying to lift himself from the dregs of his lonely existence, by engaging with the people he meets on a more real level. Unfortunately he finds the phrase "two sides of the coin" to be true to almost all situations in life, where hope and desperation co-exist. Ramchand is 'everyman' –living in a small tenement in one of the bylanes of Amritsar. The contrasting strands of the life of the privileged and the plodding existence of the poor are like the weft and weave of the saris that are sold by Ramchand. Somehow threads interweave to create saris but a few crystals sewn in, or a shot of zari woven through can make a dramatic difference. It almost seems that Ramchand will lighten his dark lonely days with his efforts at self improvement. Ramchand for all his feeling of being unschooled, has studied that special language that women speak when they shop and is good at his job at the Sevak Sari House.
- Feminist enterprise has been so far a long struggle to universalize female behaviour, their common tales of woe and sufferings under realms of patriarchy and male oppression. Be it a question of rewriting of male texts or parametering of social structure, the set pattern of feminist view point has been struggle against androcentric ethics and female sensitivity in bonding, analysing and understanding each other universally.
- Bajwa introduces a gallery of female characters, all distinct and apart in style, language, mannerism, ideology and in particular how they choose a sari, admire its texture, colour and fabric and fancy it wearing them. Mrs Sandhu wife of a chief engineer in Punjab State Electricity Board , epitomises 'power psychology' "as her rolls of fat jiggled as she waddled" into her spotless house, furnished with latest gadgetry and fashionable architectural feature. Her picture perfect frame is summed up as " A beautiful house, status family, a caring husband and good looks... what more could a woman ask for."
- The sari imagery reflects both beauty and ugliness of life real and reel. The 'rust red, blood red stains on Kamla's purple sari' and vomit stains on her blouse after her rape and violence

Notes

become a profound motive for Ramchand to avenge her wrong. The sari image is convulsed, decontrolled and deconstructed with masterly superbness & intensity of pathos. After Kamla's death, the place inside the sari shop turned claustrophobic and grave, saris flew out at Ramchand whipping around 'engulfing him like a shroud' its black border suffocating him as if coercing him to take stock of situation and bear the burden of a saviour, a role which nature had imposed on him. Marxist/ socialist feminism rests on the creed of woman as tertiary consumer and primary producer in society, be it producing offspring in the womb or cooking and cleaning or reproducing and writing. The theorization and over theorisation has destabilized the whole system of study and epistemology, regarding women.

9.3 Key-Words

1. Encapsulate : To sum up in a short or concise form; condense; abridge
2. Deceitful : Deceiving or misleading others, typically on a habitual basis

9.4 Review Questions

1. Discuss the concept of Feminism in Sari Shop.
2. Explain Rupa Bajwa as a Feminist.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (*i*) Amritsar (*ii*) Feminist Criticism
   (*iii*) Teacher (*iv*) Assistant

9.5 Further Readings

1. Bajwa, Rupa. 2004. The Sari Shop. New Delhi: Penguin.
2. Johnson, Harry M. An Introduction to Sociology.
3. Khushwant Singh. 2004. This Above All. The Tribune.
4. Lodge & Wood. 2003. Modern Criticism & Theory. Pearson Education.
5. Rege, Sharmila. 2003. Sociology of Gender. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Notes

Unit 10: Rupa Bajwa: Sari Shop—Detailed Study of the Text

CONTENTS

Objectives
Introduction
10.1 Brief Introduction to the Text
10.2 Sari Shop—Detailed Study of the Text
10.3 Summary
10.4 Key-Words
10.5 Review Questions
10.6 Further Readings

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Make a brief introduction to the Sari Shop.
- Discuss Sari Shop.

Introduction

Rupa Bajwa's debut book The Sari Shop was longlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction 2004, an award that was eventually won by Andrea Levy for Small Island. The book has won the 27-year-old Amritsar girl flattering reviews the world over with reviewers calling her India's new literary find.

Ever since she put pen to paper nothing else has mattered to Rupa Bajwa - not the various jobs she juggled over the years, not marriage that her folks thought was the most important thing for her. It was just writing. And, as she says, "I had to write just to exist." For this 27-year-old Amritsar-based author time away from writing is time wasted. And it was a brave choice indeed, because despite the occasional news of an Indian getting a fat royalty cheque and big publicity, only a handful of writers can afford to live by their muse alone. For the majority, writing can barely pay for basic amenities.

But Rupa Bajwa has been a lucky author. Her debut book The Sari Shop (Penguin) was long listed for the Orange Prize for Fiction 2004. The book has won her favourable reviews the world over and she has been hailed as India's latest literary find.

However the journey to establish herself was a bumpy one for this young writer. From rented rooms in various cities she visited `in search of peace to write' and hired computers on which she punched her story, Rupa Bajwa did have her moments of frustration and despair. Now riding on the wave of success of The Sari Shop, she has embarked on a full time career in writing. She is a prolific and a disciplined writer and is already on her second novel which she says would see the light of day soon.

Bajwa says she drags herself to her writing desk everyday no matter how hard it is. "I have a fairly regular schedule and write daily though sometimes creativity doesn't flow and it can get very frustrating. Everything is blank - mind, paper, computer screen. But one has to keep at it. Because there are times when I write intensely and non-stop for ten to twelve hours a day," she says.

Notes

Essence of Amritsar

The Sari Shop is not autobiographical as most first books tend to be. However it does capture the essence of Amritsar with all its gossip, its alleys, its busy bazaars, its dhabas (eateries), mannerisms and its petty rivalries among the rich and bored women. "Bits of yourself always creep in, sometimes without you being aware of it," she says.

The book is about the underprivileged class but Bajwa has broken away from the usual practice of Indian writers who tend to focus on their sorry circumstances, their financial problems and their oppression by the rich. She has instead made her story revolve around the anxieties of Ramchand, a lowly shop assistant at Sevak Sari House in Amritsar.

Ramchand was not born poor. His parents are killed in an accident and he is brought up by his uncle. As soon as he is old enough to fend for himself his uncle finds him a job as a shop assistant where he is condemned to a life of ennui and drudgery and far from the education he craves so much.

But all this changes suddenly when he is dispatched to the rich, English-speaking Kapoor household to deliver saris and fabrics for the daughter's trousseau. Seeing them converse in English, Ramchand's passion gets re-kindled and he buys himself a second-hand grammar book, an Oxford Dictionary, a fresh pair of socks and a bar of Lifebuoy soap. These four things, he is convinced, will give him the kind of life he has wanted since childhood.

The plot for the book was developed from Bajwa's short story she wrote a few years ago. "The idea and the character stayed with me and I kept working on the story to make it a longer narrative," she says.

The Orange Prize selects fictional work of women writers across the world. "I wouldn't want to make any sweeping generalizations here. Of course your gender affects your perspective and your experience to a certain extent, but beyond that, when it comes to the nitty-gritty of writing, I think all writers - men or women - eventually have to struggle through the same things."

Reading has been Bajwa's passion since childhood but Amritsar doesn't have many good book shops and she had to get them from Delhi or Chandigarh. She has a big list of her favourite writers. As she says, "It is a pleasure to know that you can always read a good book - at least that is one thing you can count on in an otherwise uncertain world."

And sure enough those who have read The Sari Shop agree with her statement.

10.1 Brief Introduction to the Text

Sari Shop is about many things, but for the main character, Ramchand, it is about the development of character itself, particularly about putting one's morals into practice under morally impossible circumstances. Ramchand is born into a Hindu family of shop owners.

His mother is an observant Hindu who takes him to temple weekly, but he is too young to absorb any special identity or spirituality that can be called Hindu. As an adult, Ramchand proves to be especially

empathetic toward a Sikh couple who have lost two barely adult sons in an Indira Ghandi assault on the Golden Temple of Amritsar (Operation Blue Star, 1983), trying to give solace to them in their own home.

Ramchand's parents enrolled him into English medium school at age 6, but that same year, both parents were killed in a catastrophic bus accident. Ramchand was sent to a distant uncle in Amritsar for his education, but his uncle selected a more economical curriculum. Ramchand spent summers with his grandmother. At age 15, Ramchand was withdrawn from school and received a school leaving certificate. Ramchand did not leave school with the knowledge of English he had hoped to achieve. He observed later that no one had ever asked to see his certificate showing he completed eighth grade. His work would not require much reading, writing and figuring.

Notes

The astonishing thing is that Ramchand's family expected him to support himself fully and to live independently from age 15 on--and he did without any further contact from his family apparently. The action of The Sari Shop opens when Ramchand is 26 and he has been living and working in the same place since he was 15. Through his work at the Sari Shop, Ramchand becomes acquainted with the absolute wealthiest famlies in town and even arranges a quick and dirty invitation to the wedding of one of Amritsar's wealthiest daughters.

There is a lot of description of the different kinds of saris available at the shop. They are divided by fabric, by design--by type of border, by type of skirt; there are saris and salwar kameezs, and each garmet can have a head piece called by various names such as pallu or chunni. The colors are vividly described e.g. "bottle green."

Ramchand learns from his friends at the Sari House, particularly Chander, that one of the wealthiest families in Amritsar withheld temporarily, then permanenetly, three months of regular wages from a significant number of workers. Ramchand tries talking calmly to the factory owner and is firmly told that the profit margins don't allow the wages to be paid.

Ramchand also learns that Chander's wife is the victim of "persuasion" outside the law for demanding her husband's wages. She is drunk, arrested, raped, then sexually assaulted by the police using a lathi or night stick. In a different incident, Chander's wife Kamla threw a sharp object at another of the rich family heads, Ravinder Kapoor. This time the reaction was catastrophic. Kapoor --no doubt off the record--hired goons to break all of Kamla's bones, parade her naked through the slum neighborhood, and burn down her slum house with Kamla inside.

This systematic destruction of Kamla's life creates a moral crisis for Ramchand. The families responsible are the same ones who buy the most expensive saris. The other shop boys do not see the overall implications. Ramchand stays home two weeks without authorization trying to figure out what to do.

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The book has a lot of comical elements that ride on the gossip of the ladies from the different families as they browse the saris. There is real color in the book as the descriptions of the fabrics jump off the page.

For me one of the most charming threads in the story is Ramchand's desire to learn English. Bajwa really makes it clear how lack of context makes it so hard to span the words, when one word can have so many meanings. Ramchand needs the "tuition" that the rich boys are getting. He also deserves it. Yet Ramchand is making real progress.

10.2 Sari Shop—Detailed Study of the Text

Rupa Bajwa's "The Sari Shop" set in the little city of Amritsar captures evocatively, the social atmosphere of small-town India. Her narrative encapsulates the spirit of the sari-shop environment with its spirited, intimate, interaction between shop personnel and regular patrons. In the background, the rustling silk, soft cotton and shiny synthetic saris reach out to us so realistically that we long to hold and caress them in our hands. Apart from that, the unplumbed pathos of Ramchand, an assistant in Sevak Sari Shop, whose world revolves around selling saris to the women customers, deadens our heart with sorrow. Ramchand's life and his isolation in the indifferent world are effortlessly carved out in fine detail. Is it surprising then, we are drawn to empathize with his empty, monotonous existence?

Ramachand's loss of his doting parents at a tender age is very moving. He is forced into menial work by his uncle who grabbed his inheritance. His desire to master English language is noteworthy,

Notes

as it is rekindled one day, when he is sent to display sarees for the trousseau of a wealthy man's daughter. Suddenly, his life seems to acquire a purpose as he meticulously sets about learning new English words from "Radiant Essays" and "A Complete Writer" assisted by an old Oxford English dictionary. As he reads, he seems to grasp the meaning of his life and the avidity of life around him. It was a sad moment, when he began to understand the pathos of the underdog and the aggression of the conqueror; in this case the one on top of the social hierarchy. The transformation in Ramachand is to make him humane to the hurts of society and the woes of the secondary sex, women. Kamala, the wife of another sari shop assistant Chander, inadvertently opens his eyes to the double standards lived by men in the patriarchal society. At the end of it, Ramachand realizes the futility of trying to turn the system around and instead, finds comfort in lapsing into his routine existence. Our journey is outward with Ramachand, into the stagnant, oppressive social system and inward with him into his suffocating, futile ruminations. I could only throw up my hands in utter despair, at the futility of it all, when nothing materialized. I wished that Ramachand would have persevered.

The characterization in the novel I feel is pertinent to the trivial rivalries that seethe beneath the surface of life lived by petty traders and class-conscious, middle-class wives. The wives of rich industrialists with their empty lives and the educated class with their snobbish intellectualism, is skillfully caricatured. The lives of the lower middle class, their resigned acceptance of poverty, their escape into filmi world and their aspirations to higher things through English speaking jobs, brought a lump into my throat due to the streak of desperation that intertwined hope.

I found wonderfully comical moments in the novel as, when Hari, another shop assistant imitates the portly shop owner or when Ramachand sneaks into the wealthy wedding reception to taste the forty desserts set out on the table or his surprise when he sees all the women customers and the sarees from the shop on them. The laugh aloud moments are, when I took in the spiteful chatter of the ladies on a saree buying spree or observe Ramachand's sensual day dreams revolving around Sudha, the young wife of his landlord or see him ticking off his shop manager in a perfectly structured droll English or view his attempts to combat his smelly feet with lemon juice. It is laughter mixed with pathos, when I glimpsed Rina interviewing Ramachand to exploit his naïve, comical appeal in her debut novel, while Ramachand imagines himself as suave with Rina. Is it not utter duplicity of the world where law exists for the rich while the poor timidly accept injustice? The brutal rape of Kamala, the involvement of the rich Guptas, the apathy of the educated, articulate and empowered Mrs Sachadeva, the police who pocket the bribe and punish the victim, the anguish of Ramachand who is just a bystander, left a lasting impression on me. Ramachand's new found perception, battles to bring some order into the skewered justice system in the society. His sanity rightfully takes a beating, withdraws into insanity with the intensity of its demoralization and returns to the present deceitful world to maintain its status quo. I honestly salute Ramachand's efforts, even though brief, to challenge the social hierarchical system of rich and poor.

Ramachand's attempts to imbue his life with some imagination and beauty by buying English books and trying to educate himself is very moving. At that particular moment, I recalled the mania of the Indians for the English language and their use of it as a benchmark to judge a person's knowledge and place in community. I believe, the novel is very perceptive in giving a social commentary of the society which reflects the existentialist torment of every human creature. At the same time, there is a fine balance between reality and expectation, as the incongruities of life is deftly woven into the story, I found the novel darkly humorous as it effortlessly drew me into the lives of the characters as they go about their business of living. I feel, without our volition we can empathize with Kamala or Ramachand or sneer at the hollowness of Rina or Mrs Sachadeva. It may not possible for us to break out of our boundaries or change the world around us but sometimes it is necessary to just try and understand ourselves and our life. The novel definitely

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does that. Kudos to Bajwa for her sensitive effort...Geetha Kariappa is a research scholar with her area of interest being "Feminist Criticism." She is actively involved in the field of Education and Softskills as a teacher and a trainer. She loves reading fiction, short stories and books on travel. She has written literary articles for many literary journals.

Ramchand, a shop assistant in Sevak Sari House in Amritsar, spends his days patiently showing yards of fabric to the women of "status families" and to the giggling girls who dream of dressing up in silk but can only afford cotton. When Ramchand is sent to a new part of the city to show wares to a wealthy family preparing for their daughter's wedding, he is jolted out of the rhythm of his narrow daily life. His glimpse into a different world gives him an urgent sense of possibility. He begins to see himself, his life, and his future more clearly. And so he attempts to recapture the hope that his childhood had promised, arming himself with two battered English grammar books, a fresh pair of socks, and a bar of Lifebuoy soap. But soon these efforts turn his life upside down, bringing him face to face with the cruelties on which his very existence depends.

Bajwa dramatically illustrates the class gap in contemporary India in her debut novel, focusing on the fortunes of Ramchand, a lowly, disaffected clerk in a popular sari shop. The novel opens with Ramchand happily going about his duties serving the shop's mostly upper-class clients. Opportunity for advancement comes from an unlikely source when he attracts the attention of the beautiful, literate Rina Kapoor, whose family hires the shop to provide saris for her upcoming wedding. Inspired by his foray into a wider world ("there were cars and flowerpots and frosted glass trays with peacocks on them"), Ramchand embarks on a half-baked self-improvement effort that includes a reading program and some unintentionally comic attempts to learn English. Shortly afterwards, though, Ramchand sees the other side of Indian life when the wife of one of his co-workers, a woman named Kamla, descends into public drunkenness. Ramchand is a tenderly drawn character, reminiscent of Naipaul's innocent strivers, and the rest of the cast is vividly sketched. There are several typical first-novel flaws: the narrative is slow in the first half, and Bajwa's transitions between her character-driven subplots are occasionally uneven and erratic. But Bajwa's loving attention to detail—Ramchand washing his feet with lemon juice before he visits the Kapoors, the malicious chatter of the sari-shopping ladies—paints a compelling, acerbic picture of urban India. The Sevak Sari House in Bajwa's resonant first novel is a microcosm of its surrounding town, Amritsar, and perhaps of all of India. Ramchand, a shop assistant, seems content selling saris to wealthy matrons and their daughters. But when he is sent to the opulent home of the Kapoors with stacks of saris for them to scrutinize, he experiences his first hints of discontent. Vowing to educate himself to better his place in society, Ramchand purchases some used grammar books and a dictionary, through which he plods in his off hours. He is brought back to reality when he is again sent outside the shop, this time to a co-worker's shack. Stunned by the poverty and degradation he finds there, Ramchand plunges into a deep depression over the world's inequities. After a brief and courageous outburst aimed at his higher-ups, he retreats to his old compliant self, stuck in a rut that is at least secure. Biting humor, perceptive social commentary, and the poetic telling of a poignant tale combine for an exceptional debut.

Ramchand has obediently worked as a clerk at the Sevak Sari House in the city of Amritsar, India for eleven years; alternating his time between the Sari shop located in the city's old bazaar and his one room apartment with minimal possessions. His simple life, however, takes a drastic turn when he is ordered to take a selection of saris by bicycle to a prosperous family who is preparing for their eldest daughter's wedding. Upon entering this strange new world of extravagant automobiles, air conditioning, servants, and wall-to-wall plush carpet Ramchand's mind goes in a tailspin. He has never encountered such luxury before and is deeply affected.

From this point forward Ramchand's consciousness is awakened to the issues of class that surround him in his everyday life. He becomes interested in the lives of the various woman who visit the sari shop and listen to their conversations revealing their affluent life-styles and snobbery attitudes

Notes

towards others. At the same time, and also at the other end of the class spectrum, he becomes acquainted with the dire situation of his co-worker and his wife who reside in a tin shack in a poor section of the city. Ramchand's experiences quickly led him into a dizzying philosophical journey with potential serious ramifications for many.

While The Sari Shop contains an engaging and highly entertaining plot, Rupa Bajwa's prose is often uneven and lacks a clear direction, especially towards the middle, that can possibly attributed to this being her debut novel. Hopefully her writing skills will improve and she will continue to publish thought-provoking books with memorable characters in the near future. Recommended, especially for those who enjoy Indian literature.

Longlisted for Britain's Orange Prize for Fiction in 2004, Rupa Bajwa's The Sari Shop turns the world of a small shop in Amritsar, India, into a microcosm of the society, allowing the author to explore big ideas within an intimate environment. Exploring the lives of ordinary shop salesmen, both at home and at work, as they struggle to make ends meet, she juxtaposes them against some of their wealthy clients, highlighting dramatically the economic contrasts in their lives and the differences in their expectations. From her opening description of the raucous awakening of a small neighborhood, she presents the kinds of homely details which make the setting easy to visualize, despite the cultural differences. Ramchand, now twenty-six, has been working as an assistant at the Sevak Sari House since he was fifteen, doing the same job day after day, going to a small dhaba with some of the other assistants for something to eat at night and sometimes to the movies. He has little hope of improving his station and, with his parents dead and no family in the city, little opportunity to meet a marriageable young woman or change his lonely life. Through flashbacks, the reader learns about Ramchand's family background and how he came to live alone in Amritsar. As Bajwa slowly draws the reader into the lives of other characters, the reader empathizes with them. Kamla, the wife of Chander, another of the shop assistants, is an especially pathetic case, a young woman who has been victimized by society, her husband, and her husband's former employers. Rina Kapoor, daughter of the wealthiest man in Amritsar, however, is also, in some ways, a victim of her economic situation, as are the women for whom shopping for saris is a primary activity. Only a few women here seek independent lives, these being women for whom it is an option because of their economic privilege. Kamla has no such options. When the lives of Ramchand, Kamla, Rina, and Chander intersect in a shocking climax, lives change forever.

The stunning ending is melodramatic, and Ramchand's change of character may not be completely realistic, but the story moves effectively from its quiet character study at the beginning into a compelling story of characters whose lives overlap, often unwittingly. Sometimes darkly humorous, the story has considerable charm because Ramchand himself inspires empathy. Intimate and thoughtful in its depiction of the various social strata which make up the community, the novel is more understated—less sensational and less political—than some of the more panoramic epics which have come from India in the past decade.

There are, apparently, an endless supply of narratives portraying the class inequalities in contemporary Indian life. Few of them have made it into the hands of western English readers. It is a treat that this one has overcome the narrowness of western ethnocentricity to give us an insight into the world of modern Indian culture. Rupa Bajwa opens the window for us to see the world she was born and raised in. While not biographical, it is still first hand. We see a world of rich, deep culture. But a culture, to the western mindset, of indescribable inequality without recourse to true justice. We witness a society at the crossroads of modernity and inescapable prejudice. It is not, at its core, a sad or tragic story. Neither is it a story inciting change to the established order. But it is an insight into the complex nature of the Indian psyche that must be unraveled and attempts made to resolve it before this nation can join the club of first world nations. This is Bajwa's first novel. Her newness is obvious, even to the unskilled. But that is not

Notes

a criticism per se. Her imagination, vulnerability, and even her weaknesses are cause to want to read on to the end. It is because she is not yet refined that the reader extends her grace and continues on to learn what she has to say and see where her characters go.

Self-Assessment

1. Fill in the blanks:

(*i*) Ramchand also learns that Chander's wife is the victim of ..... outside the law for demanding her husband's wages.

(*ii*) Chander's wife ..... threw a sharp object at another of the rich family heads, Ravinder Kapoor.

(*iii*) Kamla threw a sharp object on the head of ..... .

(*iv*) Each garmet can have a head piece called by various names such as pallu or chunni. This systematic destruction of Kamla's life creates a moral crisis for ..... .

10.3 Summary

- A gem of a novel about the stuff life's made of. It is another working day in Amritsar, and Ramchand is late again. He runs through the narrow streets to Sevak Sari House, buried in the heart of one of the city's main bazaars. There, amongst the Bangladesh cottons and Benaras silks, Ramchand and his fellow shop assistants sit all day, patiently rolling and unrolling yards of coloured fabric.
- Then, one afternoon, Ramchand is sent to a new part of the city with a bundle of saris carefully selected for a trousseau. His trip to Kapoor House jolts him out of the rhythm of his daily routine and his glimpse into this different world charges him with an urgent sense of possibility. And so, armed with a second-hand English grammar book and a battered Oxford Dictionary, a fresh pair of socks and a bar of Lifebuoy soap, Ramchand attempts to realize the dream that his childhood had promised. But soon these efforts turn his life upside down, bringing him face to face with the cruel reality of his very existence.
- The Sari Shop heralds the arrival of a writer who combines a profound sensitivity with humour and unflinching honesty. Rupa Bajwa's story is both heartbreaking and very real, and depicts a modern world in which hope and violence are permanently entwined
- Rupa Bajwa's "The Sari Shop" set in the little city of Amritsar captures evocatively, the social atmosphere of small-town India. Her narrative encapsulates the spirit of the sari-shop environment with its spirited, intimate, interaction between shop personnel and regular patrons. In the background, the rustling silk, soft cotton and shiny synthetic saris reach out to us so realistically that we long to hold and caress them in our hands. Apart from that, the unplumbed pathos of Ramchand, an assistant in Sevak Sari Shop, whose world revolves around selling saris to the women customers, deadens our heart with sorrow. Ramchand's life and his isolation in the indifferent world are effortlessly carved out in fine detail. Is it surprising then, we are drawn to empathize with his empty, monotonous existence?
- The characterization in the novel I feel is pertinent to the trivial rivalries that seethe beneath the surface of life lived by petty traders and class-conscious, middle-class wives. The wives of rich industrialists with their empty lives and the educated class with their snobbish intellectualism, is skillfully caricatured. The lives of the lower middle class, their resigned acceptance of poverty, their escape into filmi world and their aspirations to higher things through English speaking jobs, brought a lump into my throat due to the streak of desperation that intertwined hope.
- Bajwa dramatically illustrates the class gap in contemporary India in her debut novel, focusing on the fortunes of Ramchand, a lowly, disaffected clerk in a popular sari shop. The novel

opens with Ramchand happily going about his duties serving the shop's mostly upper-class clients. Opportunity for advancement comes from an unlikely source when he attracts the attention of the beautiful, literate Rina Kapoor, whose family hires the shop to provide saris for her upcoming wedding. Inspired by his foray into a wider world ("there were cars and flowerpots and frosted glass trays with peacocks on them"), Ramchand embarks on a half-baked self-improvement effort that includes a reading program and some unintentionally comic attempts to learn English. Shortly afterwards, though, Ramchand sees the other side of Indian life when the wife of one of his co-workers, a woman named Kamla, descends into public drunkenness. Ramchand is a tenderly drawn character, reminiscent of Naipaul's innocent strivers, and the rest of the cast is vividly sketched.

- There are, apparently, an endless supply of narratives portraying the class inequalities in contemporary Indian life. Few of them have made it into the hands of western English readers. It is a treat that this one has overcome the narrowness of western ethnocentricity to give us an insight into the world of modern Indian culture. Rupa Bajwa opens the window for us to see the world she was born and raised in. While not biographical, it is still first hand. We see a world of rich, deep culture.

10.4 Key-Words

1. Trousseau : The clothes, household linen, and other belongings collected by a bride for her marriage.
2. Prolific : Of an artist, author, or composer) Producing many works.

10.5 Review Questions

1. Give a brief introduction to the Novel Sari Shop.
2. Discuss the Rupa Bajwa's Sari Shop.
3. Explain the character sketch of Ramchand.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (*i*) Persuasion (*ii*) Kamla
   (*iii*) Ravinder Kapoor (*iv*) Ramchand

10.6 Further Readings

1. Bajwa, Roopa. 2004. The Sari Shop. New Delhi: Penguin.
2. Johnson, Harry M. An Introduction to Sociology.
3. Khushwant Singh. 2004. This Above All. The Tribune.
4. Lodge & Wood. 2003. Modern Criticism & Theory. Pearson Education.
5. Rege, Sharmila. 2003. Sociology of Gender. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Notes

Unit 11: Rupa Bajwa: Sari Shop—Theme

CONTENTS

Objectives
Introduction
11.1 Theme—Rupa Bajwa
11.2 Brief Description to Sari Shop
11.3 Summary
11.4 Key-Words
11.5 Review Questions
11.6 Further Readings

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Know the story of real life of Indian People.
- Discuss various themes presented by Rupa Bajwa in Sari Shop.

Introduction

This is a poignant story of real life India and real life Indian people. It was completely believable. The protagonist, an earnest & simple sari-walla named Ramachand, works hard everyday, studies English on his own, lives a clean and modest life dictated by his beliefs in right and wrong, accepting the simple truths of his life and history.... the circumstances of his birth and sudden orphan status, the fact that his schooling abruptly ended with his parents' death, the loss of his inheritance through unscrupulous relatives, the limitations which became his reality by virtue of circumstances. Then his whole belief system is upended by an encounter with a colleague's wife and the reality of her brutal and bitter existence. I felt the story was incredibly realistic, a story about the real India, not the India we see through the eyes of Indian immigrants to the West, or those educated in the West or with western values. No, this was an India I have not read about before. It was very eye-opening and tender and sad

11.1 Theme—Rupa Bajwa

The nature of corruption is the theme that runs through two recent novels set in contemporary India - Akhil Sharma's An Obedient Father (2000) and Rupa Bajwa's The Sari Shop (2003). Both novels feature lower middle class protagonists with limited education, in North Indian settings where the struggle for upward mobility is the defining quest. Despite significant overlaps in the cultural territory they explore and the conclusions they reach, however Sharma and Bajwa offer interesting and instructive contrasts in perspective. While Bajwa is the native born and bred, Sharma's parents emigrated from Delhi to the USA when he was still a child. Can the differences in tone and viewpoint stem from the difference in the authors' relation to the setting?

Numerous reviewers have described Sharma's fictional universe in An Obedient Father (hereafter AOF) as 'unrelentingly grim'. The place is old Delhi, the time the early 1990s when within the course of a year, petty bureaucrat Ram Karan's life is turned upside down. His wife dies and so does his son-in-law; at home, his daughter Anita returns with her own daughter Asha to live with

Notes

him and at work Ram Karan is appointed moneyman and fall guy by his boss, Mr. Gupta. As wheeler and dealer and extractor of bribes from school principals however Ram Karan has only limited flair. As he admits: 'My general incompetence and laziness at work had been apparent for...long...this is common for a certain type of civil servant who knows that he is viewed with disdain by his superiors and that he cannot lose his job.' In Ram Karan's world, the rules of public life are meant to be circumvented - his cowardice and his talent for finding moral loopholes are assets that aid his success. He becomes Mr. Gupta's right-hand man when the latter commences an ill-fated run for Parliament.

Over the course of the novel it also becomes apparent that the rationalizations and excuses Ram Karan is so adept at seep into his personal life as well - the moral miasma he operates in includes rape and incest. As Ram Karan admits at a moment of typical self-abnegation, 'My mind was attracted to what is loathsome and humiliating.' His molestation of his own daughter Anita has remained a bitter family secret, but once he reaches for his granddaughter Asha, Anita becomes the avenging goddess, determined to expose and punish him. The shape of that retribution gives the novel its title.

If Ram Karan is the consummate insider working at the heart of India's political machine, Rupa Bajwa's protagonist in The Sari Shop Ramchand is the eternal man on the margin. Orphaned at a young age and rendered asunder from the fabric of family that supports Indian society, his work restricts him to the feminized, seemingly innocuous arena of the small town sari shop where he is a salesman. The Sevak Sari House is the narrow oblique lens through which he, with the reader, views contemporary North India. There are the customers, ladies of leisure from Amritsar's elite families and then there is the lower middle class existence of Ramchand and his colleagues.

Like AOF, the precise and inescapable gradations of class (and implicitly caste) and power configure the arena of possibilities in The Sari Shop; like the former novel, the struggle for upward mobility provides the motive force. Unlike Akhil Sharma's Ram Karan, however Bajwa's Ramchand is naïve and perhaps more pertinently, young. His path of self-improvement takes him through English essay books. But for all of Ramchand's comic efforts, there is horror also at the end of the The Sari Shop - in the rape of Kamla, the wretched wife of one of his colleagues, Ramchand sees the consequences of challenging the social order. The surfaces of this world may seem smooth but the edges are jagged.

The Kamla episode has been described by many reviewers as 'melodramatic' and implausible but in fact it is no more than the stuff of numerous newspaper headlines brought home. Read together with Sharma's more polished novel, The Sari Shop thus yields an interesting counterpoint. In AOF the political becomes personal; in The Sari Shop the personal becomes political. In both the iniquities of the public sphere cannot be escaped.

Neither Sharma nor Bajwa can offer the possibility of salvation for their characters - if Ram Karan succumbs to his daughter's brutal revenge, Ramchand survives by an equally terrible anaesthetization of sensibility. Yet despite the similarly bleak outlook the two novels have a remarkably dissimilar flavor. In Sharma's Delhi, the quality of the light is almost never untainted; in Ramchand's (and Bajwa's) Amritsar occasionally the sun shines down 'gently on him, with pleasant warmth'. As The Sari Shop progresses, these moments prove to be deceptive; yet while there is no more hope here than in AOF, the possibility of recognition serves almost as a proxy for redemption.

As an illustration consider the contrasting moments of revelation of injustice in either novel. In AOF, Anita's attempts to expose Ram Karan's incestuous tendencies to her relatives are met with no more than a mild curiosity; in The Sari Shop Ramchand's attempt to draw a seemingly sympathetic and enlightened college professor into condemning the incarceration and rape of Kamla are met with frank hostility. Yet Ramchand's own breakdown and horror at Kamla's fate

Notes

undermines the conspiracy of silence that surrounds it. In Sharma's world, on the other hand, culpability is so pervasive that it is no longer even recognized - the conspiracy, if it can be called that, is one of indifference.

It is possible indeed to read AOF entirely as an allegory - in the obscenely obese character of Ram Karan we find an embodiment of the vitiated, dog eat dog way of life that characterizes the public sphere in post-colonial India; in his bloodless black ankles upon his death we see the lethal rot in that system. Numerous episodes throughout the novel document the comfortless, conscienceless cosmos that is Sharma's India. When a rich classmate in Asha's school throws away a used imported tissue, the other girls make a grab for it. When a monkey enters a women's restroom, two of the women inside manage to escape by locking the third one in to be mauled by the monkey. While these episodes early in the novel play for laughs (the humorist David Sedaris mentioned the monkey-in-the-bathroom tale in numerous interviews in praise of AOF's comic triumphs), the message is clear - Sharma's is a Darwinian world where self-preservation comes at the expense of others, even sometimes at the expense of self-respect. Similarly, in the sublime second chapter (which was earlier anthologized as 'If you sing like that for me' in Best American Short Stories 1996) Anita tries to love her husband by arranged marriage and finds that to him she is no more and no less than a life-style accessory, equivalent to a car or bungalow. Not surprisingly, social relations in this world are mediated entirely through the paradigm of use.

In the cultural landscape of Bajwa's novel the things that money can buy command a similar ascendancy in social relations - it is significant that its central arena is a shop. In the friendship of the Mrs. Sandhu, the government servant's wife and Mrs. Gupta, the businessman's, Bajwa hints at the oily nexus of corruption. The Sari Shop may be far removed from the hurly burly of public life but there is no doubt that its innocence is contaminated; and in time and unlike AOF, Ramchand comes to be the witness of that taint. Ramchand's perspective can most accurately be described as the 'critical insider', a term first used by distinguished Kannada writer U.R. Ananthamurthy. In allowing Ramchand the outsider's viewpoint and leaving some spaces uninfected by the malaise of apathy, Bajwa also opens up space for survival.

It is interesting then that the only opening possible in Sharma's world is escape. The final chapter is told in the narrative voice of Kusum, Ram Karan's youngest daughter who emigrated to the USA and married an American and who now returns to adopt the teenage Asha. The generosity of her relationship with her husband and daughter serves as a contrast to the murky, mean-spirited bonds her sister Anita has lived with. In a revealing dialogue at the end, as the plane lifts off from London's Heathrow airport, Kusum corrects Asha when the latter points to the geography they have just left behind - on the land below, says Kusum, are not paths but highways. The implicit metaphor is powerful - the highway connotes freedom and destination, features of a life in the West compared to the aimless dust paths of Delhi and/or India. Read in the light of its author's relation to the setting, AOF then is clearly the emigrant's passage to India. Like Forster's celebrated novel, Sharma's is an outsider's view. Like the other insider-outsider Sir Vidiadhar Suraj Prasad Naipaul, his vision has the merciless perspective of distance. AOF in effect offers a radical re-interpretation of Professor Godbole's mysterious comment quoted at the beginning of this essay. Culpability is indeed pervasive but in a more literal sense. The vision of AOF's characters is rendered opaque and limited by a self-serving culture that continues implicitly to excuse everything. Till the point of no return.

In comparison, The Sari Shop can be read as the insider's passage from ignorance to bitter knowledge. There is no forgiveness here either but there is the terrible grace of insight. Bajwa's characters may be no more able to change the direction of the world or even of their lives than Sharma's. But continuity is made possible precisely by the brief periods when they see through the systemic violence.

Notes

A gem of a novel about the stuff life's made of Rupa Bajwa's *The Sari Shop* is a poignant novel enhanced by its clearly etched out and identifiable stereotypical characters. The story revolves around Ramchand, an assistant in Sevak Sari Shop who goes about his humdrum life, mostly selling saris to wealthy clients who visit the store. The vivid illustration of the city of Amritsar with its gamut of people and places is indeed very compelling. The book also clearly brings out the class differences prevalent even in modern day India. The simplicity and palpability of the story are its major strengths.

11.2 Brief Description to Sari Shop

The novel opens with the description of a typical day in the life of Ramchand, in the bustling by lanes of the older part of the town of Amritsar. Orphaned in his childhood and having to live with his uncle, he deals with many hardships and has to forgo his dreams of getting an education, as he is made to fend for himself at a young age. He starts out as an apprentice at the sari shop and from then on his life is primarily restricted to the store with occasional trips to the nearby dhaba and the movies.

Ramchand comes across as a sensitive man who happily goes about his work until one day he awakens to a window of possibilities after a visit to the house of Rina Kapoor, the daughter of the wealthiest man in town. This glimpse into the world of the English-speaking affluent people awakens in him the desire to better himself. He arms himself with a couple of second hand English language and letter writing books to learn English with renewed vigour. But, with the learning he becomes more aware of the travails and tribulations in the society around him. As he strives to learn English he realises the futility of situations when he finds out about the brutal rape of Kamla, one of his co-workers' wives.

Bajwa successfully gives the readers a clear insight into the lives of her individual characters and evokes empathy for them all, as they seem to be victims of their own trappings. Her portrayal of women characters range from the socially depraved like Kamla to the privileged few like Rina Kapoor. Then there are other well-defined characters such as Mrs. Sachdeva, the college professor and Shilpa, disinterested in education and looking forward to an arranged marriage by her parents.

Laced with dark humour, *The Sari Shop* ends with Ramchand ultimately resigning to his fate after going through varying emotions of loss, pain, angst, hope, disillusionment and resentment. Overall an impressive debut.

It is another working day in Amritsar, and Ramchand is late again. He runs through the narrow streets to Sevak Sari House, buried in the heart of one of the city's main bazaars. There, amongst the Bangladesh cottons and Benaras silks, Ramchand and his fellow shop assistants sit all day, patiently rolling and unrolling yards of coloured fabric.

Then, one afternoon, Ramchand is sent to a new part of the city with a bundle of saris carefully selected for a trousseau. His trip to Kapoor House jolts him out of the rhythm of his daily routine and his glimpse into this different world charges him with an urgent sense of possibility. And so, armed with a second-hand English grammar book and a battered Oxford Dictionary, a fresh pair of socks and a bar of Lifebuoy soap, Ramchand attempts to realize the dream that his childhood had promised. But soon these efforts turn his life upside down, bringing him face to face with the cruel reality of his very existence. The Sari Shop heralds the arrival of a writer who combines a profound sensitivity with humour and unflinching honesty. Rupa Bajwa's story is both heartbreaking and very real, and depicts a modern world in which hope and violence are permanently entwined.

Part one: Ramchand, the protagonist, and all the main characters in the story, either work at or visit *The Sari shop* regularly. So the story has little to do with how the sari shop itself came into existence, or about its sales figures, or the number of varieties of silk-threaded draperies that the shop carries. All those people who scorned at the idea of having to read something that deals with boring saris, and moreover, sari shops- *come back*! It is definitely not a "chick flip".

Notes

You can't but help getting reminded of the *Amol Palekar era of Hindi movies* reading the opening half of the book. There is this plain, simple-minded, lonely hero with a poignant past, his only company being his two colleagues: one, a mature, advice-giving family man, and another, a quick-witted carefree boy. The latter named **Hari**, has almost been sold out to the readers, by being presented as extremely adorable and cheerful; just like a comedian, who though crass and crude reaches out to the audience.

The parts where **Ramchand** pursuits for English-language education, his turmoil while encountering with a professor in the shop, the homework he does before visiting a royal customer's house, and the effort he puts in while sitting with his books, trying to make sense out of them- all form a very delightful read. However, towards the end of the first part, the story drags, becomes repetitive, and you wish the author would move on to unravel **Lakhan Singh**'s story, and also the mystery behind the woman who *drinks*. You also become impatient as the apparently-unimportant characters such as **Tina Kapoor** and **Bhimsen Seth** are pointlessly discussed extensively. *It was a well-crafted book, it began and ended well, the chapters flew seamlessly into each other. There was a good streak of humour running through it. It received favourable reviews in the press…* goes the description given by the author about one of her characters, **Rina Kapoor**'s book. Coincidentally, this could be the perfect account of the first part of the novel, that too, in the author's own words.

When we first meet Ramchand, a clerk in an Amritsar sari shop, he is late for work. Ramchand is habitually late for work. In fact, he is not terribly happy, longing instead for the life he would have had if his parents hadn't been killed in an accident when he was an child. One of the most affecting sections describes his childhood. His father took him on his lap, saying he would send him to an English school so Ramchand could have a better life than he. But the uncle who took him in after his parents' death also took him out of school and claimed his father's shop for his own. Thus, Ramchand is not even a shopkeeper, but a clerk in someone else's. So Ramchand decides to teach himself English; his bumbling attempts are both funny and sad. At the same time, an opportunity for advancement presents itself when a wealthy family comes to the sari shop to outfit the daughter for her wedding, and he is sent to their house. Ramchand starts to see his world expand.

But it's not quite so easy to escape the confines of poverty and lack of education–and this tale, while funny, is also heartbreaking. Ultimately, Ramchand is confronted with the choice of existence or principles. I thought Bajwa did a good job caricaturing upper class Indian families. She even pokes gentle fun at her own class–and maybe even herself–in the character of Rina, the rich, affianced daughter who publishes a book on a sari shop clerk. For me, this sly insertion redeemed the subject matter because it's too easy–too *hip* — to write about the victim, especially when the writer is clearly not one. All in all, *The Sari Shop* wasn't as powerful as some other Indian lit out there, but it was very readable.

The first thing you notice about this book – especially if you have not read *The Sari Shop* – is the cover. It is absolutely beautiful, with different pictures put together in an apparently random pattern, but which come together brilliantly. The cover I have tucked here doesn't do justice, so I am also inserting the link to the full cover jacket. Set partly in the small, buzzing town of Amritsar and partly in New Delhi, this is the story of Rani, a young Indian woman who enjoys her work in a local beauty parlour, loves telling bedtime stories to her little nephew, and is blissfully in love with Shah Rukh Khan, the movie star. However, her naturally happy disposition is marred by the real world. Her lower middle-class family lives in a state of constant struggle – to make ends meet, to hang on to their dreams, to keep their fragile lives from collapsing. However, as their financial troubles escalate, so do Rani's sister-in-law's taunts, brother's frustration and father's resignation. Rani's stories dry up. And her solitary journey of love and loss begins. Random events happen that affect each of them, changing their lives forever, and Rani finds herself in Delhi, in a sudden head-on collision with a world completely alien to her. She finds an unlikely ally in her employer, Sadhna, a stalled novelist, who has been unable to function in a savage literary marketplace.

The plot in itself is exceedingly simple. Rani is your girl-next-door in every middle class family.

Notes

She left school after barely completing class nine and works in a beauty parlor as an assistant. Even though real-life-problems keep intruding in the form of a broken home which can barely survive the next monsoon and a vile sister-in-law, she is essentially happy reading *Filmfare*, watching Shah Rukh Khan movies and making up stories to her nephew, whom she loves like her own son.

However, her carefree existence is disturbed by reality. The financial troubles are unending and domestic disputes escalate to such a point that her gentle, nonplussed father can not bear the onslaught of his son and daughter-in-law's taunts, and quietly dies. Rani has lost the connection she had with her brother and his wife, who now treat her as nothing more than a burden to be pawned off. It does not take her long to realize that the city she has loved from the first day will only now only suffocate her. She packs her meager belongings, bids her nephew a tearful goodbye and leaves Amritsar to work as a maid for Sadhna, a woman who has been disillusioned by a savage literary market place.

In Sadhna, we perhaps see an autobiographical glimpse of the author herself. Sadhna is a frustrated novelist whose first book released to great critical acclaim but who has now been struggling – unsuccessfully – to write her next. Acclaimed as the new 'literary find', she was expected to release her second novel within the subsequent couple of years. But she did not – could not – because she had lost the ability to write. Literature was not, as she had thought, a truthful, pure place where one could work hard to filter away the lies. It was a lie itself now, living it a savage marketplace.

Rupa Bajwa's first novel, *The Sari Shop*, was an immense success and released in 2004. This eight year gap between her first book and the second, **Tell Me A Story**, is highly reminiscent of Sadhna's story. I wonder whether she experienced the same emotions Sadhna talks about.

Backtracking to the plot: Rani comes to Delhi, to try and make sense of her life. According to the blurb, "…and her solitary journey of love and loss begins." It does not, not immediately. For the fifty pages that follow her arrival to Delhi, the pages are hazy, almost going nowhere. Rani comes across people completely alien to her, who spend thousands on a bottle of wine and can't bring themselves to be genuinely sad for a friend who has just lost a father.

This contrast becomes a little lost on the reader, initially. But the author has been gifted with the art of getting into the skin of her characters. Her words flow unrestricted and we follow the transformation of Rani into a sensible adult who has learned what life is quite early in her life. She has lost sight of the simple pleasures of life and has nobody to turn to. But an interesting friend is delivered in the form of Sadhna and it looks like she has begun healing from the pain of her loss, when another bombshell drops and her mettle is tested again. The novel ends at a disconsolate note, just short of abrupt and the reader is left feeling strangely out of sorts, wanting for more. Exactly what a good novel should do. To sum it up, I would say that the author has an excellent eye for detail and writes about ordinary people going about mundane tasks in a way that makes it highly readable.

Rani is with her nephew, watching Ravan being burnt as part of the Dusshera celebrations: When she opened her eyes, the fireworks were still going, the crowd was still cheering. And Rani had the strangest feeling. Hundreds, maybe even thousands, of humans had gathered, had put up effigies of a man, his brother and his son, and for some wrongs that the three had supposed to have done, god knows how many years ago, wrongs that these people had not even witnessed, they were punishing them. And they were celebrating the punishment. The hatred was being carefully kept alive. It did not seem like the celebration of good conquering evil. It seemed like the celebration of savagery, of unforgiving cruelty, of harsh judgement.

Rupa Bajwa's *The Sari Shop*, set in a world far removed from the one FIE usually addresses, explores the power of language through a narrative device. Ramchand, the sari shop attendant, glimpses the world inhabited by those who speak English in India and hopes to make sense of this world through a knowledge of English. The book he picks up – *Complete Letter Writer* – leaves him absurdly adrift among Phyllis and Peggy writing to each other about a motor tour to Caernavarvon and Betws-y-Coed.

Notes

The Sari Shop, even if only partially successful, is an attempt to look at a gated community from below, from the point of view of the world of the household – maids, drivers and washerwomen– and its extension into the commerce of daily life in the form of office boys and the owners and attendants at vegetable stalls and *kirana* stores. It actually works better than a novel far more acclaimed outside India for its portrayal of 'the seamy side of the Indian reality' – *The White Tiger*. The two books explore some of the same territory, but so much is shrugged off in Adiga's book, including the ease with which the central character acquires his knowledge of English in a Bihar village, that his driver remains a cipher, a mouthpiece for the author himself, in tone and in thought. An experiment with form cannot be born out of the need to conceal an ignorance of the material at hand.

Ramchand's fate as he seeks to make sense of a motor tour to Wales is not very removed from the one that awaits an Indian reader of recent works of FIE. Maybe we could rescue ourselves from this fate if we were used to reading literature that lay outside the Anglo-American world. Societies similar to ours have produced literature that resonates far more in our context. We should take note of the diversity of central Europe of the early twentieth century, a diversity Magris so vividly describes. I certainly find the echoes of my surroundings in the clash of languages and identities that was mediated by the vast bureaucracy of the Hapsburg Empire. The best guides to this era are still writers such as Robert Musil and Hermann Broch, and for this reason they are good guides to our world as well. I know of nothing quite as insightful about the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's sudden emergence in small-town India as Broch's *The Spell*, which traces the rise of fascism through the eyes of a doctor who has moved to a remote mountain village. These authors also point to another possibility we could explore, which is the presence of the intellect in the narrative, so far from the fear of ideas that besets the Anglo-Americans. I could quote from Zadie Smith again but I think a reader would be far better served by dipping into Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*.

Self-Assessment

1. Fill in the blanks:

(*i*) Ram Karan's youngest daughter who emigrated to the USA and married an American and who now returns to adopt the teenage ..... .

(*ii*) As Ram Karan admits at a moment of typical ..... .

(*iii*) The Sevak Sari Shop attracted all sorts. They have a strict task master of a boss called ..... who used to ensure that they catered to all the customers in the best way they could.

11.3 Summary

- The novel opens with the description of a typical day in the life of Ramchand, in the bustling by lanes of the older part of the town of Amritsar. Orphaned in his childhood and having to live with his uncle, he deals with many hardships and has to forgo his dreams of getting an education, as he is made to fend for himself at a young age. He starts out as an apprentice at the sari shop and from then on his life is primarily restricted to the store with occasional trips to the nearby dhaba and the movies.
- The plot in itself is exceedingly simple. Rani is your girl-next-door in every middle class family. She left school after barely completing class nine and works in a beauty parlor as an assistant. Even though real-life-problems keep intruding in the form of a broken home which can barely survive the next monsoon and a vile sister-in-law, she is essentially happy reading *Filmfare*, watching Shah Rukh Khan movies and making up stories to her nephew, whom she loves like her own son.

Notes

- However, her carefree existence is disturbed by reality. The financial troubles are unending and domestic disputes escalate to such a point that her gentle, nonplussed father can not bear the onslaught of his son and daughter-in-law's taunts, and quietly dies. Rani has lost the connection she had with her brother and his wife, who now treat her as nothing more than a burden to be pawned off. It does not take her long to realize that the city she has loved from the first day will only now only suffocate her. She packs her meager belongings, bids her nephew a tearful goodbye and leaves Amritsar to work as a maid for Sadhna, a woman who has been disillusioned by a savage literary market place.
- Rupa Bajwa's first novel, *The Sari Shop*, was an immense success and released in 2004. This eight year gap between her first book and the second, **Tell Me A Story**, is highly reminiscent of Sadhna's story. I wonder whether she experienced the same emotions Sadhna talks about.
- **Rupa Bajwa's** *The Sari Shop*, set in a world far removed from the one FIE usually addresses, explores the power of language through a narrative device. Ramchand, the sari shop attendant, glimpses the world inhabited by those who speak English in India and hopes to make sense of this world through a knowledge of English. The book he picks up – *Complete Letter Writer*– leaves him absurdly adrift among Phyllis and Peggy writing to each other about a motor tour to Caernavarvon and Betws-y-Coed.
- *The Sari Shop*, even if only partially successful, is an attempt to look at a gated community from below, from the point of view of the world of the household – maids, drivers and washerwomen– and its extension into the commerce of daily life in the form of office boys and the owners and attendants at vegetable stalls and *kirana* stores. It actually works better than a novel far more acclaimed outside India for its portrayal of 'the seamy side of the Indian reality' – *The White Tiger*. The two books explore some of the same territory, but so much is shrugged off in Adiga's book, including the ease with which the central character acquires his knowledge of English in a Bihar village, that his driver remains a cipher, a mouthpiece for the author himself, in tone and in thought. An experiment with form cannot be born out of the need to conceal an ignorance of the material at hand.

11.4 Key-Words

1. Embodiment : A tangible or visible form of an idea, quality, or feeling, the representation or expression of something in such a form.
2. Iniquities : Lack of justice or righteousness; wickedness; injustice

11.5 Review Questions

1. What is the theme of the Novel Sari Shop? Discuss.
2. What do you mean by the gem of novel about the stuff life's made of Rupa Bajwa.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (*i*) Asha (*ii*) Self-abnegation (*iii*) Mahajan

11.6 Further Readings

1. Bajwa, Roopa. 2004. The Sari Shop. New Delhi: Penguin.
2. Johnson, Harry M. An Introduction to Sociology.
3. Khushwant Singh. 2004. This Above All. The Tribune.
4. Lodge & Wood. 2003. Modern Criticism & Theory. Pearson Education.
5. Rege, Sharmila. 2003. Sociology of Gender. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Notes

Unit 12: Rupa Bajwa: Sari Shop—Characterisation and Plot Construction

CONTENTS

Objectives

Introduction

12.1 Characterization of the Novel Sari Shop

12.2 Plot of the Sari Shop

12.3 Summary

12.4 Key-Words

12.5 Review Questions

12.6 Further Readings

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Discuss the characterization in Sari Shop.
- Explain the Plot construction of Sari Shop.

Introduction

Rupa Bajwa's debut book The Sari Shop revolves around Ramchand a salesperson at a sari shop in the old area of Amritsar. Ramchand's life is chronicled and interwoven with stories and tidbits from the lives of others around him. Ramchand and his colleagues wait on the richest and the most powerful ladies in Amritsar who choose to come to this sari shop for the variety and quality that it promises. From university professors who look down upon money, and rich business people who look down on people who may not have the kind of money they had. The Sevak Sari Shop attracted all sorts. They have a strict task master of a boss called Mahajan who used to ensure that they catered to all the customers in the best way they could.

Ramchand lost his parents, who he adored and looked up to, in an accident when he was very young. He is brought up by his uncle and aunt. As he grows up, he realizes that he has been cheated by his uncle of the shop that his father owned and the jewelery that his mother owned. He is left with nothing. His uncle gets him at apprenticeship at the sari shop and that is where he stayed. He remembered how his father used to want that his son to learn English. He realizes that people who know English have an edge, and so he starts his journey to self-improvement. He picks up second-hand letter writing books, a dictionary and works hard at it even when in most cases, the context itself is not very clear to him.

What I really loved about the book is the way the author describes things in the book. Right from the way the old market area in Amritsar is set up, to Ramchand's sensitivity is beautifully portrayed. Ramchand's amazement when he sees women wearing the sarees that they bought at the shop. For some reason he had never put it together that people wear the expensive sarees they buy to functions and weddings. Instances of how the sales people at the shops are considered invisible or non-existent by the customers as they talk and gossip away while browsing through the saris. The rich-poor divide is well brought out. Ramchand is easily affected by the others around him. Even

Notes

a scolding from Mahajan for coming late has quite an impact on him. One day he unwittingly comes across some issues which he initially ignores and later his conscience prevents him from ignoring and carrying on with his life. Things come to a head when lives across the spectrum of society clash in a way which most of them would have never anticipated..

The ending especially is poignant and makes one wonder at how different people come to terms with what life offers them. The book has several stories, intricately woven into one. It was a 4/5 read for me. There was something that was missing from making it a completely wonderful read, for me.

12.1 Characterization of the Novel Sari Shop

Rupa Bajwa's "The Sari Shop" set in the little city of Amritsar captures evocatively, the social atmosphere of small-town India. Her narrative encapsulates the spirit of the sari-shop environment with its spirited, intimate, interaction between shop personnel and regular patrons. In the background, the rustling silk, soft cotton and shiny synthetic saris reach out to us so realistically that we long to hold and caress them in our hands. Apart from that, the unplumbed pathos of Ramchand, an assistant in Sevak Sari Shop, whose world revolves around selling saris to the women customers, deadens our heart with sorrow. Ramchand's life and his isolation in the indifferent world are effortlessly carved out in fine detail. Is it surprising then, we are drawn to empathize with his empty, monotonous existence?

Ramachand's loss of his doting parents at a tender age is very moving. He is forced into menial work by his uncle who grabbed his inheritance. His desire to master English language is noteworthy, as it is rekindled one day, when he is sent to display sarees for the trousseau of a wealthy man's daughter. Suddenly, his life seems to acquire a purpose as he meticulously sets about learning new English words from "Radiant Essays" and "A Complete Writer" assisted by an old Oxford English dictionary. As he reads, he seems to grasp the meaning of his life and the avidity of life around him. It was a sad moment, when he began to understand the pathos of the underdog and the aggression of the conqueror; in this case the one on top of the social hierarchy. The transformation in Ramachand is to make him humane to the hurts of society and the woes of the secondary sex, women. Kamala, the wife of another sari shop assistant Chander, inadvertently opens his eyes to the double standards lived by men in the patriarchal society. At the end of it, Ramachand realizes the futility of trying to turn the system around and instead, finds comfort in lapsing into his routine existence. Our journey is outward with Ramachand, into the stagnant, oppressive social system and inward with him into his suffocating, futile ruminations. I could only throw up my hands in utter despair, at the futility of it all, when nothing materialized. I wished that Ramachand would have persevered.

Did u know? The characterization in the novel I feel is pertinent to the trivial rivalries that seethe beneath the surface of life lived by petty traders and class-conscious, middle-class wives. The wives of rich industrialists with their empty lives and the educated class with their snobbish intellectualism, is skillfully caricatured.

The lives of the lower middle class, their resigned acceptance of poverty, their escape into filmi world and their aspirations to higher things through English speaking jobs, brought a lump into my throat due to the streak of desperation that intertwined hope.

I found wonderfully comical moments in the novel as, when Hari, another shop assistant imitates the portly shop owner or when Ramachand sneaks into the wealthy wedding reception to taste the

Notes

forty desserts set out on the table or his surprise when he sees all the women customers and the sarees from the shop on them. The laugh aloud moments are, when I took in the spiteful chatter of the ladies on a saree buying spree or observe Ramachand's sensual day dreams revolving around Sudha, the young wife of his landlord or see him ticking off his shop manager in a perfectly structured droll English or view his attempts to combat his smelly feet with lemon juice. It is laughter mixed with pathos, when I glimpsed Rina interviewing Ramachand to exploit his naïve, comical appeal in her debut novel, while Ramachand imagines himself as suave with Rina.

Is it not utter duplicity of the world where law exists for the rich while the poor timidly accept injustice? The brutal rape of Kamala, the involvement of the rich Guptas, the apathy of the educated, articulate and empowered Mrs Sachadeva, the police who pocket the bribe and punish the victim, the anguish of Ramachand who is just a bystander, left a lasting impression on me. Ramachand's new found perception, battles to bring some order into the skewered justice system in the society. His sanity rightfully takes a beating, withdraws into insanity with the intensity of its demoralization and returns to the present deceitful world to maintain its status quo. I honestly salute Ramachand's efforts, even though brief, to challenge the social hierarchical system of rich and poor.

Ramachand's attempts to imbue his life with some imagination and beauty by buying English books and trying to educate himself is very moving. At that particular moment, I recalled the mania of the Indians for the English language and their use of it as a benchmark to judge a person's knowledge and place in community. I believe, the novel is very perceptive in giving a social commentary of the society which reflects the existentialist torment of every human creature. At the same time, there is a fine balance between reality and expectation, as the incongruities of life is deftly woven into the story,

I found the novel darkly humorous as it effortlessly drew me into the lives of the characters as they go about their business of living. I feel, without our volition we can empathize with Kamala or Ramachand or sneer at the hollowness of Rina or Mrs Sachadeva. It may not possible for us to break out of our boundaries or change the world around us but sometimes it is necessary to just try and understand ourselves and our life. The novel definitely does that. Kudos to Bajwa for her sensitive effort...

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12.2 Plot of the Sari Shop

Bajwa dramatically illustrates the class gap in contemporary India in her debut novel, focusing on the fortunes of Ramchand, a lowly, disaffected clerk in a popular sari shop. The novel opens with Ramchand happily going about his duties serving the shop's mostly upper-class clients. Opportunity for advancement comes from an unlikely source when he attracts the attention of the beautiful, literate Rina Kapoor, whose family hires the shop to provide saris for her upcoming wedding. Inspired by his foray into a wider world ("there were cars and flowerpots and frosted glass trays with peacocks on them"), Ramchand embarks on a half-baked self-improvement effort that includes a reading program and some unintentionally comic attempts to learn English. Shortly afterwards, though, Ramchand sees the other side of Indian life when the wife of one of his co-workers, a woman named Kamla, descends into public drunkenness. Ramchand is a tenderly drawn character, reminiscent of Naipaul's innocent strivers, and the rest of the cast is vividly sketched. There are several typical first-novel flaws: the narrative is slow in the first half, and Bajwa's transitions between her character-driven subplots are occasionally uneven and erratic. But Bajwa's loving attention to detail—Ramchand washing his feet with lemon juice before he visits the Kapoors, the malicious chatter of the sari-shopping ladies—paints a compelling, acerbic picture of urban India.

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The Sevak Sari House in Bajwa's resonant first novel is a microcosm of its surrounding town, Amritsar, and perhaps of all of India. Ramchand, a shop assistant, seems content selling saris to wealthy matrons and their daughters. But when he is sent to the opulent home of the Kapoors with stacks of saris for them to scrutinize, he experiences his first hints of discontent. Vowing to educate himself to better his place in society, Ramchand purchases some used grammar books and a dictionary, through which he plods in his off hours. He is brought back to reality when he is again sent outside the shop, this time to a co-worker's shack. Stunned by the poverty and degradation he finds there, Ramchand plunges into a deep depression over the world's inequities. After a brief and courageous outburst aimed at his higher-ups, he retreats to his old compliant self, stuck in a rut that is at least secure. Biting humor, perceptive social commentary, and the poetic telling of a poignant tale combine for an exceptional debut.

Ramchand has obediently worked as a clerk at the Sevak Sari House in the city of Amritsar, India for eleven years; alternating his time between the Sari shop located in the city's old bazaar and his one room apartment with minimal possessions. His simple life, however, takes a drastic turn when he is ordered to take a selection of saris by bicycle to a prosperous family who is preparing for their eldest daughter's wedding. Upon entering this strange new world of extravagant automobiles, air conditioning, servants, and wall-to-wall plush carpet Ramchand's mind goes in a tailspin. He has never encountered such luxury before and is deeply affected.

From this point forward Ramchand's consciousness is awakened to the issues of class that surround him in his everyday life. He becomes interested in the lives of the various woman who visit the sari shop and listen to their conversations revealing their affluent life-styles and snobbery attitudes towards others. At the same time, and also at the other end of the class spectrum, he becomes acquainted with the dire situation of his co-worker and his wife who reside in a tin shack in a poor section of the city. Ramchand's experiences quickly led him into a dizzying philosophical journey with potential serious ramifications for many.

While T**he Sari Shop** contains an engaging and highly entertaining plot, Rupa Bajwa's prose is often uneven and lacks a clear direction, especially towards the middle, that can possibly attributed to this being her debut novel. Hopefully her writing skills will improve and she will continue to publish thought-provoking books with memorable characters in the near future. Recommended, especially for those who enjoy Indian literature.

Longlisted for Britain's Orange Prize for Fiction in 2004, Rupa Bajwa's The Sari Shop turns the world of a small shop in Amritsar, India, into a microcosm of the society, allowing the author to explore big ideas within an intimate environment. Exploring the lives of ordinary shop salesmen, both at home and at work, as they struggle to make ends meet, she juxtaposes them against some of their wealthy clients, highlighting dramatically the economic contrasts in their lives and the differences in their expectations. From her opening description of the raucous awakening of a small neighborhood, she presents the kinds of homely details which make the setting easy to visualize, despite the cultural differences. Ramchand, now twenty-six, has been working as an assistant at the Sevak Sari House since he was fifteen, doing the same job day after day, going to a small dhaba with some of the other assistants for something to eat at night and sometimes to the movies. He has little hope of improving his station and, with his parents dead and no family in the city, little opportunity to meet a marriageable young woman or change his lonely life. Through flashbacks, the reader learns about Ramchand's family background and how he came to live alone in Amritsar. As Bajwa slowly draws the reader into the lives of other characters, the reader empathizes with them. Kamla, the wife of Chander, another of the shop assistants, is an especially pathetic case, a young woman who has been victimized by society, her husband, and her husband's former employers. Rina Kapoor, daughter of the wealthiest man in Amritsar, however, is also, in some ways, a victim of her economic situation, as are the women for whom shopping for saris is a primary activity. Only a few women here seek independent lives, these being women for whom

Notes

it is an option because of their economic privilege. Kamla has no such options. When the lives of Ramchand, Kamla, Rina, and Chander intersect in a shocking climax, lives change forever.

The stunning ending is melodramatic, and Ramchand's change of character may not be completely realistic, but the story moves effectively from its quiet character study at the beginning into a compelling story of characters whose lives overlap, often unwittingly. Sometimes darkly humorous, the story has considerable charm because Ramchand himself inspires empathy. Intimate and thoughtful in its depiction of the various social strata which make up the community, the novel is more understated—less sensational and less political—than some of the more panoramic epics which have come from India in the past decade. Mary Whipple.

There are, apparently, an endless supply of narratives portraying the class inequalities in contemporary Indian life. Few of them have made it into the hands of western english readers. It is a treat that this one has overcome the narrowness of western ethnocentricity to give us an insight into the world of modern Indian culture. Rupa Bajwa opens the window for us to see the world she was born and raised in. While not biographical, it is still first hand. We see a world of rich, deep culture. But a culture, to the western mindset, of indescribable inequality without recourse to true justice. We witness a society at the crossroads of modernity and inescapable prejudice. It is not, at its core, a sad or tragic story. Neither is it a story inciting change to the established order. But it is an insight into the complex nature of the Indian psyche that must be unraveled and attempts made to resolve it before this nation can join the club of first world nations. This is Bajwa's first novel. Her newness is obvious, even to the unskilled. But that is not a criticism per se. Her imagination, vulnerability, and even her weaknesses are cause to want to read on to the end. It is because she is not yet refined that the reader extends her grace and continues on to learn what she has to say and see where her characters go. I applaud this first effort and hope she will give us further enrichment into her world and opportunity to watch her mature into a major force in literature.

Self-assessment

1. Fill in the blanks:

(*i*) ..... lost his parents, who he adored and looked up to, in an accident when he was very young.

(*ii*) The Sari Shop revolves around Ramchand a ..... person at a sari shop in the old area of Amritsar.

(*iii*) Rina Kapoor was a literate whose family hires the shop to provide saris for her upcoming ..... .

12.3 Summary

- Bajwa dramatically illustrates the class gap in contemporary India in her debut novel, focusing on the fortunes of Ramchand, a lowly, disaffected clerk in a popular sari shop. The novel opens with Ramchand happily going about his duties serving the shop's mostly upper-class clients. Opportunity for advancement comes from an unlikely source when he attracts the attention of the beautiful, literate Rina Kapoor, whose family hires the shop to provide saris for her upcoming wedding. Inspired by his foray into a wider world ("there were cars and flowerpots and frosted glass trays with peacocks on them"), Ramchand embarks on a half-baked self-improvement effort that includes a reading program and some unintentionally comic attempts to learn English. Shortly afterwards, though, Ramchand sees the other side of Indian life when the wife of one of his co-workers, a woman named Kamla, descends into public drunkenness.

Notes

- While T**he Sari Shop** contains an engaging and highly entertaining plot, Rupa Bajwa's prose is often uneven and lacks a clear direction, especially towards the middle, that can possibly attributed to this being her debut novel. Hopefully her writing skills will improve and she will continue to publish thought-provoking books with memorable characters in the near future. Recommended, especially for those who enjoy Indian literature.
- The stunning ending is melodramatic, and Ramchand's change of character may not be completely realistic, but the story moves effectively from its quiet character study at the beginning into a compelling story of characters whose lives overlap, often unwittingly. Sometimes darkly humorous, the story has considerable charm because Ramchand himself inspires empathy. Intimate and thoughtful in its depiction of the various social strata which make up the community, the novel is more understated—less sensational and less political—than some of the more panoramic epics which have come from India in the past decade. Mary Whipple.
- Her newness is obvious, even to the unskilled. But that is not a criticism per se. Her imagination, vulnerability, and even her weaknesses are cause to want to read on to the end. It is because she is not yet refined that the reader extends her grace and continues on to learn what she has to say and see where her characters go. I applaud this first effort and hope she will give us further enrichment into her world and opportunity to watch her mature into a major force in literature.

12.4 Key-Words

1. Perceptive : Having or showing sensitive insight.
2. Bystander : A person who is present at an event or incident but does not take part.
3. Avidity : Extreme eagerness or enthusiasm.

12.5 Review Questions

1. Discuss the characterization of Sari Shop.
2. What is the plot of Sari shop? Discuss.

Answers: Self-Assessment

1. (*i*) Ramchand (*ii*) Sales
   (*iii*) Wedding.

12.6 Further Readings

1. Bajwa, Roopa. 2004. The Sari Shop. New Delhi: Penguin.
2. Johnson, Harry M. An Introduction to Sociology.
3. Khushwant Singh. 2004. This Above All. The Tribune.
4. Lodge & Wood. 2003. Modern Criticism & Theory. Pearson Education.
5. Rege, Sharmila. 2003. Sociology of Gender. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Notes

Unit 13: Rupa Bajwa: Sari Shop—Psychological Study

CONTENTS

Objectives
Introduction
13.1 Sari Shop—A Psychological Study
13.2 Summary
13.3 Key-Words
13.4 Review Questions
13.5 Further Readings

Objectives

After reading this Unit students will be able to:

- Focus on the Sari Shop as a psychological study.
- Discuss how Ramchand is considered as protagonist.

Introduction

Rupa Bajwa is an Indian writer, born in Amritsar, Punjab, in 1976. She published in 2004 her first novel, The Sari Shop, which explores her hometown and the class dynamics of India. The novel has yielded the writer flattering reviews, with reviewers calling her India's new literary find. The novel won the Commonwealth award in 2005 and India's prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for English 2006.

"Bajwa dramatically illustrates the class gap in contemporary India in her debut novel, focusing on the fortunes of Ramchand, a lowly, disaffected clerk in a popular sari shop. The novel opens with Ramchand happily going about his duties serving the shop's mostly upper-class clients. Opportunity for advancement comes from an unlikely source when he attracts the attention of the beautiful, literate Rina Kapoor, whose family hires the shop to provide saris for her upcoming wedding.

Inspired by his foray into a wider world ('there were cars and flowerpots and frosted glass trays with peacocks on them'), Ramchand embarks on a half-baked self-improvement effort that includes a reading program and some unintentionally comic attempts to learn English. Shortly afterwards, though, Ramchand sees the other side of Indian life when the wife of one of his co-workers, a woman named Kamla, descends into public drunkenness. Ramchand is a tenderly drawn character, reminiscent of Naipaul's innocent strivers, and the rest of the cast is vividly sketched. There are several typical first-novel flaws: the narrative is slow in the first half, and Bajwa's transitions between her character-driven sub plots are occasionally uneven and erratic. But Bajwa's loving attention to detail - Ramchand washing his feet with lemon juice before he visits the Kapoors, the malicious chatter of the sari-shopping ladies - paints a compelling, acerbic picture of urban India.

13.1 Sari Shop—A Psychological Study

The Sari Shop is a compact psychological study of a sari-walla in Amritsar. It focusses on the contrasts between his life and 1) what his father had hoped for him; 2) the customers of the sari shop; 3) his co-workers; 4) the suffering wife of this co-worker. These drive him to a breaking

Notes

point. Unlike many books about India, this one does not end in utter tragedy. The novel is entirely modern in its setting and focused in its concerns. No reference is made to Amritsar's tragic history under the British Raj, but perhaps the author assumes that the reader cannot be unaware of the broader context of the novel. If you are unaware, I highly recommend Paul Scott's Raj Quartet.

Ramchand, a tired shop assistant in Sevak Sari House in Amritsar, spends his days patiently showing yards of fabric to the women of "status families" and to the giggling girls who dream of dressing up in silk but can only afford cotton. When Ramchand is sent to show his wares to a wealthy family preparing for their daughter's wedding, he is jolted out of the rhythm of his narrow daily life. His glimpse into a different world gives him an urgent sense of possibility. And so he attempts to recapture the hope that his childhood had promised, arming himself with two battered English grammar books, a fresh pair of socks, and a bar of Lifebuoy soap. But soon these efforts turn his life upside down, bringing him face to face with the cruelties on which his very existence depends. Reading group guide included.

This was an interesting book, along similar lines to the books by Kaled Housseini, however set in India and not quite as well written. It revealed a lot about the Indian class system and society and was quite sad. The only thing I did not like about this book, is that the main character had the potential to really make something of himself or perhaps to even challenge the status quo, however after one bad exchange, he gave up and went back to his mundane life, with the suggestion that he had given up his quest for self-achievement for good, which was pretty disheartening and not how I thought the story would end. Overall though, a pretty good read.

It was an interesting but ultimately depressing read. The main character, Ramchand, was very sympathetic. A sensitive young man who had lost his parents when he was 6 years old when there bus tipped over. He was taken in by a man who called himself uncle, who had a wife and several children of his own. But Ramchand was not treated like one of their own children. He grew up to be a solitary sort, having been sent to work in the sari shop when he was 15. His parents had instilled in him the importance of education and he had a yearning to improve himself.

At the Sari Shop, he is exposed to women from wealthy families and is inspired to study english, spending his meager earnings on books. One day one of his colleagues does not come to work and Ramchand is sent to find out why. He goes to the address in a squalid part of the city and finds his colleagues wife in a drunken stupor. This wife was also an orphan but her experiences had scarred her badly and having discovered her husband's liquor, she had become an alcoholic. Ramchand was moved to try and help her and almost lost his job and his sanity in the process. This story exposes the corrupting influence of wealth and the corrosive effects of poverty that continue in parts of India today .. Ramchand is born into a Hindu family of shop owners. His mother is an observant Hindu who takes him to temple weekly, but he is too young to absorb any special identity or spirituality that can be called Hindu. As an adult, Ramchand proves to be especially empathetic toward a Sikh couple who have lost two barely adult sons in an Indira Ghandi assault on the Golden Temple of Amritsar (Operation Blue Star, 1983), trying to give solace to them in their own home.

Did u know? The Sari Shop is about many things, but for the main character, Ramchand, it is about the development of character itself, particularly about putting one's morals into practice under morally impossible circumstances.

Ramchand's parents enrolled him into English medium school at age 6, but that same year, both parents were killed in a catastrophic bus accident. Ramchand was sent to a distant uncle in

Notes

Amritsar for his education, but his uncle selected a more economical curriculum. Ramchand spent summers with his grandmother. At age 15, Ramchand was withdrawn from school and received a school leaving certificate. Ramchand did not leave school with the knowledge of English he had hoped to achieve. He observed later that no one had ever asked to see his certificate showing he completed eighth grade. His work would not require much reading, writing and figuring.

The astonishing thing is that Ramchand's family expected him to support himself fully and to live independently from age 15 on—and he did without any further contact from his family apparently. The action of The Sari Shop opens when Ramchand is 26 and he has been living and working in the same place since he was 15. Through his work at the Sari Shop, Ramchand becomes acquainted with the absolute wealthiest famlies in town and even arranges a quick and dirty invitation to the wedding of one of Amritsar's wealthiest daughters. There is a lot of description of the different kinds of saris available at the shop. They are divided by fabric, by design—by type of border, by type of skirt; there are saris and salwar kameezs, and each garmet can have a head piece called by various names such as pallu or chunni. The colors are vividly described e.g. "bottle green." Ramchand learns from his friends at the Sari House, particularly Chander, that one of the wealthiest families in Amritsar withheld temporarily, then permanenetly, three months of regular wages from a significant number of workers. Ramchand tries talking calmly to the factory owner and is firmly told that the profit margins don't allow the wages to be paid. Ramchand also learns that Chander's wife is the victim of "persuasion" outside the law for demanding her husband's wages. She is drunk, arrested, raped, then sexually assaulted by the police using a lathi or night stick. In a different incident, Chander's wife Kamla threw a sharp object at another of the rich family heads, Ravinder Kapoor. This time the reaction was catastrophic. Kapoor —no doubt off the record—hired goons to break all of Kamla's bones, parade her naked through the slum neighborhood, and burn down her slum house with Kamla inside. This systematic destruction of Kamla's life creates a moral crisis for Ramchand. The families responsible are the same ones who buy the most expensive saris. The other shop boys do not see the overall implications. Ramchand stays home two weeks without authorization trying to figure out what to do. The book has a lot of comical elements that ride on the gossip of the ladies from the different families as they browse the saris. There is real color in the book as the descriptions of the fabrics jump off the page.

For me one of the most charming threads in the story is Ramchand's desire to learn English. Bajwa really makes it clear how lack of context makes it so hard to span the words, when one word can have so many meanings. Ramchand needs the "tuition" that the rich boys are getting. He also deserves it. Yet Ramchand is making real progress. I rarely give just two stars. The setting and details of life in India is very descriptive and visual. I enjoyed that. The story itself pulled me along but I was disappointed in the end. Some of the events seemed inevitable. The book jacket calls it a "satire." I just don't "get" it as such. Perhaps I'd have to have grown up in India.

Here is my biggest problem with the book (besides plot), there are endless references to specific things in India that are not commonly known by an American. These words are not italicized, nor is there a glossary. One could assume some general meanings. I found this disconcerting to the flow of the book. It is written in English, I presume, as there is no translator. However, when I want to read with a red pen in my hand, it is not a good sign. This could have been much tighter. If you love India, well, I still can't recommend it. There are so many beautifully written books about it. I'd say, pass. As I will pass along this copy to a friend who is so called to return to India, that I suspect she will overlook all of the picky details I have mentioned.

Rupa Bajwa makes her debut with a haunting story set in Amritsar. It is a quintessential Indian story, but one that diverges from the usual existential woe stories of the Indian middle class. This one goes a bit lower, in terms of the protagonist - a sari shop assistant, and through his eyes paints a miniature picture of 'the other india'. In spite of a troubled childhood, he lives an

Notes

uncomplicated home-shop-home life, until one trip outside this routine, changes his outlook. Thus begins a journey - a search for a meaningful existence, which brings with it an empathy for others. Juxtaposed with him, is another character, who hasn't had a great childhood herself, and manages to fall deeper into the morass of her life, when she tries to rebel against the unfairness of it all. Their meeting brings about the next turning point in the story. Throughout the story there are several instances that show the superficiality of the people around him, especially the upper classes, and their innate selfishness. The climax has been treated extremely well - closing the door to the larger world. Tragic, but realistic. And it is perhaps that streak of realism that runs through the book, that forces the reader to feel for the characters, and their pain. Meanwhile, I think the author has managed to be a part of the novel too, literally, through the character of Rina Kapoor. A very good read, especially if you're into Indian fiction. This is a poignant story of real life India and real life Indian people. It was completely believable. The protagonist, an earnest & simple sari-walla named Ramachand, works hard everyday, studies English on his own, lives a clean and modest life dictated by his beliefs in right and wrong, accepting the simple truths of his life and history.... the circumstances of his birth and sudden orphan status, the fact that his schooling abruptly ended with his parents' death, the loss of his inheritance through unscrupulous relatives, the limitations which became his reality by virtue of circumstances. Then his whole belief system is upended by an encounter with a colleague's wife and the reality of her brutal and bitter existence. I felt the story was incredibly realistic, a story about the real India, not the India we see through the eyes of Indian immigrants to the West, or those educated in the West or with western values. No, this was an India I have not read about before. It was very eye-opening and tender and sad.

When it comes to contemporary fiction, I seek out the uncelebrated little novels more often than the awards shortlisters. This is one such book. It's the story of Ramchand, who is bestowed with a thrilling opportunity to experience the world outside his employer's sari shop. Rupa Bajwa has yet to publish a second novel, but I'll be ready to read it when she does Ms. Bajwa's debut novel is a poignant tale to say the least. She has a compelling ability to write about and portray daily life in her hometown of Amritsar, India. She caputures the culture and transfers it into words that make you feel YOU are THERE, in Amritsar. I could hear the sounds, see the sights, smell the smells and listen to the people. I will be looking forward to future novels by this author.

From back cover: "When Ramchand is sent to a new part of the city to show wares to a wealthy family preparing for their daughter's wedding, he is jolted out of the rhythm of his narrow daily life. His glimpse into a different world gives him an urgent sense of possibility. He begins to see himself, his life, and his future more clearly. And so he attempts to recapture the hope that his childhood had promised, arming himself with two battered English grammar books, a fresh pair of socks, and a bar of Lifebuoy soap. But soon these efforts turn his life upside down, bringing him face to face with the cruelties on which his very existence depends." Ramchand is a quiet, slightly withdrawn clerk at the Sevak Sari House, the most elite sari shop in the small city of Amritsar. Slowly sinking into apathy because of the drudgery of his day to day existence, Ramchand is startled back into life when he is chosen to deliver saris to the soon-to-be-married daughter of the most powerful family in town. Drawn to the elegance of Rina Kapoor's life, he vows to better himself to improve his lot in life. Using his valuable savings to purchase used books, Ramchand teaches himself to read English. In the midst of his self-improvement project, Ramchand is sent on another errand, a journey which takes him to the depths of Amritsar society. Dispatched to find an absent coworker, Ramchand learns more than he ever wanted about the tragedy of his colleague's home life. The more he learns about the crazy drunken wife of his coworker, the more disaffected Ramchand becomes with his life and the inequalities of Indian society. This book is a well-drawn picture of the extremes of Indian society. A quick read, The Sari Shop nevertheless provokes deeper reflection on the ties that bind us all to the life we know. In an interview at the end of the

Notes

book, the author talks about writing it to express her frustration with Indian society and the vast inequalities facing women and the poor. I enjoy fiction about India, and believe this is one of the better treatments I've read on the subject. This debut novel certainly points to better things to come from Rupa Bajwa.

Self-Assessment

1. Fill in the blanks:

(*i*) When Ramchand is sent to a new part of the city to show wares to a wealthy family preparing for their ..... .

(*ii*) The novel won the Commonwealth award in ..... and India's prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for English ..... .

(*iii*) Rupa Bajwa is an Indian writer, born in Amritsar. She published her first novel, ...

(*iv*) Ramchand washing his ..... with lemon juice before he visits the Kapoors.

13.2 Summary

- Ramchand, a shop assistant in Sevak Sari House in Amritsar, spends his days patiently showing yards of fabric to the women of "status families" and to the giggling girls who dream of dressing up in silk but can only afford cotton. When Ramchand is sent to a new part of the city to show wares to a wealthy family preparing for their daughter's wedding, he is jolted out of the rhythm of his narrow daily life. His glimpse into a different world gives him an urgent sense of possibility. He begins to see himself, his life, and his future more clearly. And so he attempts to recapture the hope that his childhood had promised, arming himself with two battered English grammar books, a fresh pair of socks, and a bar of Lifebuoy soap. But soon these efforts turn his life upside down, bringing him face to face with the cruelties on which his very existence depends.
- The Sari Shop is a compact psychological study of a sari-walla in Amritsar. It focusses on the contrasts between his life and 1) what his father had hoped for him; 2) the customers of the sari shop; 3) his co-workers; 4) the suffering wife of this co-worker. These drive him to a breaking point. Unlike many books about India, this one does not end in utter tragedy. The novel is entirely modern in its setting and focused in its concerns. No reference is made to Amritsar's tragic history under the British Raj, but perhaps the author assumes that the reader cannot be unaware of the broader context of the novel. If you are unaware, I highly recommend Paul Scott's Raj Quartet.
- At the Sari Shop, he is exposed to women from wealthy families and is inspired to study english, spending his meager earnings on books. One day one of his colleagues does not come to work and Ramchand is sent to find out why. He goes to the address in a squalid part of the city and finds his colleagues wife in a drunken stupor. This wife was also an orphan but her experiences had scarred her badly and having discovered her husband's liquor, she had become an alcoholic. Ramchand was moved to try and help her and almost lost his job and his sanity in the process. This story exposes the corrupting influence of wealth and the corrosive effects of poverty that continue in parts of India today.
- The Sari Shop is about many things, but for the main character, Ramchand, it is about the development of character itself, particularly about putting one's morals into practice under morally impossible circumstances. Ramchand is born into a Hindu family of shop owners. His mother is an observant Hindu who takes him to temple weekly, but he is too young to

Notes

absorb any special identity or spirituality that can be called Hindu. As an adult, Ramchand proves to be especially empathetic toward a Sikh couple who have lost two barely adult sons in an Indira Ghandi assault on the Golden Temple of Amritsar (Operation Blue Star, 1983), trying to give solace to them in their own home.

- Rupa Bajwa makes her debut with a haunting story set in Amritsar. It is a quintessential Indian story, but one that diverges from the usual existential woe stories of the Indian middle class. This one goes a bit lower, in terms of the protagonist - a sari shop assistant, and through his eyes paints a miniature picture of 'the other india'. In spite of a troubled childhood, he lives an uncomplicated home-shop-home life, until one trip outside this routine, changes his outlook. Thus begins a journey - a search for a meaningful existence, which brings with it an empathy for others. Juxtaposed with him, is another character, who hasn't had a great childhood herself, and manages to fall deeper into the morass of her life, when she tries to rebel against the unfairness of it all. Their meeting brings about the next turning point in the story.

13.3 Key-Words

1. Malicious : Characterized by malice; intending or intended to do harm: "malicious rumors
2. Vividly Sketched : producing powerful feelings or strong, clear images in the mind: a vivid description.

13.4 Review Questions

1. Write a short note on life and works of Rupa Bajwa.
2. Discuss Sari Shop as a psychological study.

1. (*i*) Daughter's Wedding (*ii*) 2005, 2006
   (*iii*) The Sari Shop (*iv*) Feet

13.5 Further Readings

1. Bajwa, Roopa. 2004. The Sari Shop. New Delhi: Penguin.
2. Johnson, Harry M. An Introduction to Sociology.
3. Khushwant Singh. 2004. This Above All. The Tribune.
4. Lodge & Wood. 2003. Modern Criticism & Theory. Pearson Education.
5. Rege, Sharmila. 2003. Sociology of Gender. New Delhi: Sage Publications.