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Editor

Anuradha Madhavrao Baswante

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● Editor ●

**Anuradha Madhavrao Basvante**

● Mailing Address ●

**Editor, PATRON**

Maharana Pratapsinh Chowk,

Plot No. 79, Gandhinagar,

NANDED - 431 605 (M.S.)

e-mail : [patronirj@gmail.com](mailto:patronirj@gmail.com)

Cell : 9404900318

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- ***A STUDY OF COUNTERPARTS: INDIAN ADIVASI  
AND LE GUIN'S ATHSHEANS*** 140  
Navle Balaji Anandrao
- ***AN INVESTIGATION TO MODERN URDU  
GHAZAL IN MARATHWADA*** 145  
Dr. Gulnaz Begum Md. Ishaque Khan  
Dr. Shaikh Haroon M.
- ***DECODING NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION*** 149  
Tayade Narendra Sonu
- ***GANDHIAN PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION  
A CRITICAL STUDY*** 156  
Zunjare Ashok
- ***DESIGN AND APPLICATION OF E-LEARNING TO  
ENHANCE QUALITY AND ACCESSIBILITY TO EDUCATION*** 160  
Muntajeeb Ali Baig
- ***TO STUDY THE CORRELATION BETWEEN BLOOD CONTENT  
HAEMOGLOBIN, BLOOD GLUCOSE LEVEL ON THE  
EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE*** 164  
Dr. Gingine Ashok
- ***ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION ATTITUDE AMONG RESIDENTS  
OF AURANGABAD CITY*** 170  
Dr. Mrs. Talat Naseer
- ***PROBLEMS DISCUSSED IN JOHN GALSWORTHY'S  
THE SKIN GAME*** 176  
Dawane Chandrashekhar  
Sarang Gajanan Haribhau
- ***NISSIM EZEKIEL: QUEST FOR SELF AND ROOTS*** 179  
Mr. Inandar Omkar Nagesh
- ***DIALOGIC FEATURES IN AMITAV GHOSH'S  
THE SHADOW LINES*** 185  
Himayatnagarkar Deepak
- ***ROLE OF INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN MODELS  
AND THEIR PLACE IN DISTANCE LEARNING*** 189  
Muntajeeb Ali Baig

## DIALOGIC FEATURES IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES*

Himayatnagarkar Deepak

Asst. Professor, Department of English, Venutai Chavan College, Karad  
Tal. Karad, Dist. Satara (Maharashtra)

The present article intends to make use of Bakhtin's theory of dialogism to study Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1895-1975), born in the Russian town of Orel, is one of the greatest twentieth-century theorists of literature. His theory of the novel relies on such key concepts as polyphony, heteroglossia, dialogism and the carnivalesque. Bakhtin has used the concept of "dialogism" to refer to the "intense interanimation and struggle between one's own and another's word". This concept of the multivoiced nature of discourse received its fullest treatment in "Discourse in the Novel" (1934-35), a key text for narrative, linguistic, and literary theory. This essay offers Bakhtin's most elaborate analysis of "dialogism" and its relationship to style in novel. Taking a point of departure from Bakhtin's analysis of "dialogism" in this essay, the present article intends to study Ghosh's experiments with the narrative technique in *The Shadow Lines*.

Dialogism is a term used by Mikhail Bakhtin to describe how a literary work may incorporate a rich variety of multiplicity of voices, styles, and points of view. Unlike monologic text, which depends on the centrality of single authoritative voice, the

dialogic text allows for a plurality of independent and unmerged voices, and consciousness, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices. (Gillespie, 761)

The English terms **dialogic** and **dialogism** often refer to the concept used by the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin in his work of literary theory, *The Dialogic Imagination*. Bakhtin contrasts the dialogic and the "monologic" work of literature. The dialogic work carries on a continual dialogue with other works of literature and other authors. It does not merely answer, correct, silence, or extend a previous work, but informs and is continually informed by the previous work. Dialogic literature is in communication with multiple works. This is not merely a matter of influence, for the dialogue extends in both directions, and the previous work of literature is as altered by the dialogue as the present one is. In this sense, Bakhtin's "dialogic" is analogous to T.S. Eliot's ideas in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," where he holds that "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past."

The term 'dialogic', however, does not just apply to literature. For Bakhtin, all



languages – indeed, all thought – appeared dialogic. This means that everything, anybody ever says always exists in response to things that have been said before and in anticipation of things that will be said in response. We never, in other words, speak in a vacuum. As a result, all language (and the ideas which language contains and communicates) is dynamic, relational and engaged in a process of endless redescriptions of the world. (Markova, I 2006)

Dialogism in Ghosh's novels can be seen reflected in the characters' action of dwelling in travel in cultural spaces that flow across borders- the 'shadow lines' drawn around modern nation states. Ghosh's ethnography, 'In an Antique Land', for example, recovers the historically situated subjectivities of a network of traders and their slaves operating between North Africa and South-West India during the middle Ages. This cultural space is a vast, borderless region with its own hybrid languages and practices which circulate without national or religious boundaries. Ghosh's writing draws attention to the complex 'roots' and 'routes' that make up the relations between cultures. In his writings, Ghosh moves freely between anthropology, history and fiction.

Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines*, the novel under the present study, uses the history of border crossing, diaspora and migration. The narrator's family is Hindu. It fled from their home in Dhaka to Calcutta after the formation of East Pakistan. There, this Hindu family and one English family, during the Second World War, are woven together by a complex series of cultural

crossings. Mrs. Price's father, Lionel Tresawson, lived in India before independence after travelling widely in the empire. The narrator's uncle, Tridib, went to London and lived with the Prices during the war. The narrator's own history continues this pattern of dwelling in travel.

The narrator's story from innocence to experience and from childhood to adulthood is articulated through both his real and his vicarious experiences, ranging from those heard from Tridib and Tha'mma to those actually lived with Ila, Nick and May. It is the kind of Bakhtinian 'novel of emergence' in which 'man's individual emergence is inseparably linked to historical emergence on the border between two epochs. It is also an inverse variation of another kind of Bakhtinian 'novel of emergence' that 'traces a typically repeating path of man's emergence from youthful idealism and fantasies to mature sobriety and practicality.' It is towards the end of his fictional journey that the narrator wishfully reverts to a kind of childlike innocence in a romantic idealization of a world without 'shadow lines'. (Nivedita Sen: 2002: 130) Travelling is not just between two geographical locations or two points in history, but is the ability to shift from experience to experience, both in terms of time and space – imaginatively erasing the 'shadow lines' between two people's experiences in disparate geographical contexts and at discrete historical junctures, and at times trespassing into the formidable or forbidden domain of people who are slotted higher or lower in the hierarchy of

class or race. While doing this, it sometimes becomes equally necessary to jump the border between real and imaginary experience, as borne out by the scene in which the narrator and Ila play 'house' and give away many of their real and gut emotions of love, hate, fear and persecution.

Tridib who is the narrator's non-conformist uncle was killed by a mob during a Muslim riot. This moment was directly experienced by May, Robi, the grandmother and the others. All these characters reexperience it at different points of time in the course of the novel. And it is imaginatively lived and experienced by the narrator, through the other characters' painful reminiscences, and through his own determined effort to find meaning into it, and not let the significant moment 'vanish without trace'. When the narrator meets Tridib he says:

"I'm not meeting you for the first time; I've grown up with you." (*The Shadow Lines* 55)

It is this traumatic experience which severely affects the life of the narrator in the novel.

*The Shadow Lines* is essentially a dialogic novel. Its narratives reach into the lives of individuals and communities. There are different stories in the novel to make them heard with sometimes frightening effects. The narrator's voice is always being usurped by others who act as the narrators within the different time frames. His own point of view is constantly being interrogated (even by himself).

The narrator remains unnamed until the end of the novel and can be, in a way,

envisioned as Tridib's alter ego who vicariously lives time past and all those places that he had never actually visited through Tridib's eyes. In his intimate and somewhat complicated relationship with his uncle Tridib which the narrator/author explores at length in the novel, he decides that his uncle who was so intricately bound to his life 'had looked like me'.

As a narrative device the narrator seeks to unify and integrate the divergent strands of the stories, the different voices and characters that constitute his memory and his limited knowledge of events. As the memories and experiences of other characters filter through his consciousness, and as he represents and renarrates them, the reader is made aware of the multiple levels of narration and the absence of a univocal narrative. The collapsing of distinctions between the narrator and Tridib's consciousness is related to the narrator's desire to be seen as Tridib. It is very much evident in the ending of the novel where the narrator gets intimate with May, his uncle's beloved. It is, therefore, safely concluded that Amitav Ghosh's novels *The Shadow Lines* is remarkable for the presence of dialogic features of temporal slippage and spatial disorientation, have been characterized by a narrative discourse without a single (or simple) narratorial anchor.

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