

Love in Strange Lands: Fetishising the Foreign Subject in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

Tanishka

Abstract

The idea of interracial desire and the conflict it tends to bring in the postcolonial discourse of looking at the relationship between the colonised and the coloniser remains a topic of debate. This idea is further problematised when the roots of an interracial sexual relation are rooted in the male desire that fantasises the foreign woman as a strange, exotic and mysterious subject. Here this desire is not limited to just a quest for love, but it tends to take the shape of a fetish that is often projected as a love quest. The aim of this paper is to explore the intricacies of interpersonal relationships in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, with the focus on the treatment and fetishisation of female characters by the male characters in the novel. This paper intends to explore the depiction of interpersonal relationships between people from different nations, cultures and races through a close reading and textual criticism to explore the issues that such relationships tend to bring in *The Shadow Lines* which indicates the possibility of a foreign fetish as its root. It also attempts to understand the orientalist connotations and the role of colonialism at its foundation. Apart from this, the paper explores the idea of lands and spaces and how they work as a drop back to the fantasy and desire for a foreign and strange subject in terms of spaces as well as people.

Keywords: *Foreign, Fetish, Desire, Interracial, Interpersonal relationships, Strangeness*

Introduction

With the emergence of cosmopolitanism, the arbitrary borders between nations seem to cease. The cosmopolitanism in the intermingling of nations beyond borders of culture, race and countries, is best exemplified through the interpersonal, especially romantic and sexual relationships between the people of two different nationalities. While on the surface, this seems to be a step towards creating the sense of harmony between the nations, the complexities of these relationships are far more critical and need to be scrutinised beyond its surface.

The Shadow Lines (1995) deals with the ideas of national identities, cultural differences and how the arbitrary frontiers affect individuals personally and politically as some of its major themes. The theme of personal relationships between the characters, especially the romantic and sexual ones is the focused area of this paper. It is interesting to note that “*The Shadow Lines* describes no sexual or romantic relationship between two people who share an obvious identity of nationality, race or cultural experience” (Kaul, 1995, p. 271). This fact indicates that these relationships origin from the sense of foreignness felt by the characters. This paper explains the term foreign as not limited to just nationalities but goes beyond it and includes the sense of strangeness and difference that are cultural and mark the difference between the characters’ ways of life.

When it comes to the critical work on the women characters of *The Shadow Lines* the major body of work limits its focus to the role of these women in the context of nationalism. The treatment of women as an object of desire of the male characters and the sexual politics played with the sexual relationships between the characters who are foreign to each other in multiple ways remains less explored. This paper ventures into this less traveled dimension by primarily using the tools of textual criticism and close reading in order to bring forth issues that are generated in sexual relationships between foreign people, and aims to explore the possibilities of a foreign fetish in such relationships, which is often dismissed as a mere quest for love.

To begin with the analysis of the relationship between the characters it is important at the outset to understand what each term in the title of the paper stands for. The use of the term ‘foreign’ stands for the sense of foreignness felt by the characters that emerges from their idea of others being ‘different’ and ‘strange’ from them. The term foreign does not only stand for a subject belonging

to a different nation state, but it also stands for the characters belonging to the same nation, race and culture but being different from each other in multiple ways that define their identity as a 'foreign' subject in the eyes of the other characters. The 'foreign subject' that the title refers to are the women characters of the novel, and the paper expands the discussion on the same. Fetishising here stands for the desire that the characters feel towards the subject they consider foreign or strange. "Before being an erotic concept fetish was used to describe an object with powers over other" (Srivastava, 2022, pp. 338-339). Alfred Binet used it in the erotic sense and believed its roots to be in one's childhood, which was later expanded by Magnus Hirschfeld's theory of fetishism, that believed in the emergence of desire to be based on one aspect of the person not the person themselves." (Srivastava, 2022, p. 339). Such psychological foundations on the concept of fetish provide insights to understand the psychology of the characters and the formation of foreign fetish in them. Tridib's initial interest in his "love- across- the- seas" (Ghosh, 1995, p. 175) emerged from the Tristan story he had heard in his childhood. Similarly, the Narrator's idea of desire was a product of distant identity he felt with his cousin Ila which emerged from the particular aspect of her being different and strange to him. In contradiction to the usual ground of familiarity, desire here emerges from the sense of difference and centers around it. Desire takes the shape of fetish as it is generated from the sense of difference and strangeness between the characters that makes them pursue the mysterious foreign subject. Love in this context often works as a mask in the presence of fetish. The idea of lands works as a backdrop to fulfill the characters' fantasy of the foreign subject. It is crucial in order to understand the role of lands and spaces in the construction of cultural identities.

The Shadow Lines depicts multiple romantic relationships and interestingly as Suvir Kaul (1995) points out, none of them are between people belonging to the same nation, culture or racial identity- "desire originates and finds its object across borders" (p. 271). Such relationships are seen between Tridib and May, most apparently and between Ila and the unnamed narrator although it is never consummated and does not take the shape of a reciprocated relationship as such. Later such a relationship is also generated between May and the narrator, who is the alter ego of Tridib and inherits his role completely at the climax of the novel as he makes love with his love interest. The relationship between Ila and Nick stands in contrast to the fetish factor but the complexities of this

relationship draw upon the stereotypes and conflicts of the racial differences between the people of the colonised and coloniser nations.

One of the most brutal outcomes of imperialism is the mental imperialism that remained alive in the minds of colonised groups even after political freedom was achieved. What the novel portrayed as a desire which turns into fetish has its roots in the orientalist construction of the white-brown relationships. The concept of orientalism refers to how the West oriented India as an exotic land for their political and sensual desire. Orient was an “European invention”, “...a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (Said, 1978, p. 9). These characteristics of the East were a construction of the Western imagination, which established itself as superior by looking at the orient as a canvas, subjected to their political and sensual desires. Such an image of the orient can be seen being reversed in the novel. The way male characters project their desire of foreignness on women is closely related to the colonial encounter where desire for the western object and the fulfillment of the same brings a sense of achievement. This aspiration to achieve the beloved who inhibits the traits of the superior West reflects the construction of the orient as an exotic and strange entity which is constructed by the West as an outcome of their political and imaginative projection. The same projection is seen through the Narrator’s infatuation towards Ila as well as Ila’s desire to be with Nick, further reflecting her own aspiration to be accepted by the West – a culture she believes she belongs to but has never felt accepted. The construction of an identity which deems Indianness as inferior – a place to run away from and sees the West as the final aspiration – a place aimed to be belonged to. This construction exists in a flux. They cannot completely be constructed in the idealised image of the West, but they keep trying to mimic their ways with the hope to finally be accepted there.

The idea of mimicry is significantly used in the novel. This idea was introduced by Homi K. Bhabha as a tool of imperial control. The idea refers to the constant attempt to follow the ways of the coloniser West because of the inferior position of the orient, which generates the desire to imitate the superior West and be accepted by them. This leads to an ambivalent identity which is “not quite/not white” (Bhabha, 1984, p. 132). In this race of acceptance, the superior West stays like a parallel which can never be met. It is like a mirror quite similar but never the same. Ila exemplifies the “mimic men” (Bhabha, 1984, p. 128), since

her early teen years. As the Narrator recalls her dressed in “English clothes” (Ghosh, 1995, p. 43), “faded blue jeans and a T-shirt—like no girl I had ever seen before except in pictures in American Magazines” (Ghosh, 1995, p. 81). For Ila it is essential to completely discard her Indian identity in order to achieve freedom. Her sense of freedom lies in leaving behind a culture that constantly polices her sexuality and expression of the same. For her attempt of finding freedom, she is called a “greedy little slut” by her grandmother Thamma. But despite her attempts she is never fully accepted by the English culture. She faces racism as a child and later is forced to stay in an unhappy marriage with Nick, her ultimate tragedy which she saw as the final means of acceptance in a foreign culture. She functions as a “narrative scapegoat” (Kaul, 1995, p. 273) in the novel, cautioning against the disrobing of one’s authentic identity only to succumb to an ambivalent self which never truly belongs to a place. Apart from Ila, the Narrator as well desires acceptance in an image carved by his desire towards the attraction based on foreignness he feels for Ila. Growing up when Ila shares about Nick fondly, the Narrator realises his desire is unrequited. Subconsciously he starts to compare himself to Nick and exhibits a hidden urge to mimic him. He recalls this as “Nick Price, whom I had never seen...became a spectral presence beside me...always bigger and better, and in some way more desirable - I did not know what, except that it was so in Ila’s eyes and therefore true” (Ghosh, 1995, p. 50).

The role of mimicry further takes the shape of a caricatured identity which is reduced to a means of joke. This is portrayed by the character of Ila’s mother. She is constantly referred to as “Queen Victoria” (Ghosh, 1995, p. 25). She is a Bengali woman, but her mannerism reflects a typical Victorian woman. Her mannerism has taken the shape through the mimicry of English women she has been seeing in her foreign trips. The concept of mimicry finds its roots in colonised India where Macaulay declared Europe’s intention to form a different type of Indian class which follows European mannerism, by disrobing them of their ingenious identity. In his Minutes on Indian education, he refers to “a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (Macaulay, 1958, p. 601). This was the initiation of an identity in flux, never authentic and never truly mirrored. Macaulay instilled a need of changing Indian identity as an attempt by the white men to civilise the savage tribes. The characters of the novel can be seen as the construction of

the macaulayan imagination whose desire finds its subject only in the people who are culturally, characteristically and constitutively other and different than them. It represents orient trying to mimic the Western culture in order to be accepted because they deem it as superior, which takes the shape of fetish for it being rooted in this particular aspect of foreignness.

“The politics based on ‘self’ vs ‘other’ or ‘us’ vs ‘them’ does not have to be confined to border areas. It gradually becomes a psychological phenomenon that goes beyond any race, ethnicity, nationality, and so on” (Sen, 2019, p. 58). Sen’s argument that the idea of self and other is not confined to the idea of nation, culture and ethnicity which are the broad markers of the difference between the identities, but the politics of self and other is rather a psychological phenomenon which is quite profoundly applicable to the context of *The Shadow Lines*. The feelings of desire that are seen on the part of the unnamed narrator for his cousin Ila are mostly based on this. The narrator and Ila share familial bonds but despite this Ila and the narrator are quite different from each other. The narrator develops a sense of attraction towards her which remains constant in their adulthood as well. This attraction is rooted in the ways the narrator finds Ila to be foreign, exotic and mysterious, as he meets her years after their adolescence, he says, “she looked improbably ‘exotic’ to me” (Ghosh, 1995, p. 81), and how “Ila baffled me yet again with the ‘mystery’ of differences” (Ghosh, 1995, p. 44). For the development of the psyche of the narrator Ila has played a significant role as the constant other since their childhood, it is through her, the narrator gets a glimpse of life abroad, the different culture and ways of life. This becomes a burden on Ila to represent the exotic and foreign to the narrator and she is prompted to act in foreign ways to serve the imagination of the narrator. “He learns from her a conflicted idiom of sexuality, particularly in so far as that language of desire is a central element in the complex of ideas that demarcate, for him, home from abroad, Indian’ from the foreign” (Kaul, 1995, p. 271), suggesting “in *The Shadow Lines* differentiated sexualities are a key element in the discourse of nationality and nationalism” (Kaul, 1995, p. 271).

Kaul’s argument of sexualities playing an important role in creating the idea of nationalities is a crucial topic in the discourse of postcolonial discourse with reference to interracial relationships. The attraction of the narrator towards Ila is a prime example of the same which is a result of fetishising her as a foreign subject. Ila, despite her race, ethnicity and nationality does not belong

to India. She wants freedom from the very culture that constructs the identity of Indianness in general and Indian woman in particular. Ila is treated as a western influence for her western ways that not only fit the Indian identity but even corrupt it as it is depicted through her treatment at the hands of Thamma and Robi who pass a moral judgment on her. However, it is because of her western ways of life and cultural distinction the narrator develops attraction towards her which is further transformed in a sense of fetish that keeps him bound with her and becomes a burden for her. While on the other hand Ila and Nick stand as an antithesis of the idea of fetish and represent the conflicted relationship between people of different culture and race and carries the idea of racial discrimination.

The relationship of Tridib and May is crucial to the study of fetishising the foreign subject. "The seduction of 'foreignness' for the male imagination- the possibilities it makes available- characterizes the May- Tridib couple too" (Kaul, 1995, p. 275). The romantic relation between May- Tridib begins through Tridib's fourth letter that depicts a pornographic description of a sexual encounter between two strangers that he witnessed as a child in war time London. Tridib, who has spent his early years in wartime London is in true sense a cosmopolitan not only because of his experiences but also because of his intellectual capacities to invent and revisit places through the power of his imagination. But his desire for a stranger that takes the shape of a love quest can be seen as a result or at least the part of his cosmopolitan identity that manifests itself in his desire to meet his lover as a stranger.

Tridib's sexual awakening takes place from his experiences of witnessing two strangers indulging in a sexual encounter which is a crucial factor in his desire of his lover as a stranger, besides the above mentioned incident, the 'Tristan story' that Mr. Snipe told him as a birthday present in wartime London about "a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman- across- the- seas"(Ghosh, 1995, p. 186) draws a parallel with Tridib's confession of his love to May saying "you're my love, my love-across-the-seas"(Ghosh, 1995, p. 175). May has been a subject of male desire that takes the shape of fetish in the multiple episodes of the novel. When Tridib mentions her name while telling a story to his acquaintances at the Gole Park the first question is asked is whether she is sexy. Suvir Kaul expands this argument as "the discourse of male sexuality is derived from its conflicted and romanticised sense of the 'foreign' female body" (Kaul,

1995, p. 271). This argument is applicable to both Tridib and the narrator. May is strange and foreign to Tridib not just in terms of nationality but culture and context as well. May's humanitarian is western in its approach that is most powerfully manifested when she is not able to understand the sensitivities of the communal riots in Indian context and out of her humanitarian spirit goes out of the car to save Jethamoshai in Dhaka, which results in Tridib's tragic death. Despite these differences of cultural and national identities Tridib's desire finds its way to May because she is the mysterious and stranger lover he desires which in the larger context is a manifestation of male desire for foreign female subjects rooted in the sense of fetish. May- Tridib can be seen as an example of "miscegenated coupling" (Brody, 1998, p. 12). It represents an interpersonal relationship between people from different classes, race and nationality. Such binaries exist in opposition to each other and can only exist in the presence of the other. The desire essentially emerging from these roots represents the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchal culture" (hooks, 1992, p. 22), further highlighting the subconscious desire for acceptance in the Western culture.

The idea of lands, spaces and mapping also play a crucial role to understand the construction of foreign subjects and its fetish. "Cartography is a method of Othering. The distancing lines across the map symbolise a permanently transformed national identity" (Laskey & Prathim, p. 35). Tridib's identity is transcendental beyond the boundaries of nations and culture; this evokes the desire to meet May in a ruin, "a place free of history" (Ghosh, 1995, p. 170). Tridib's desire of meeting May as a stranger and at a place that is free of history hence brings a sense of being strange and foreign that can be seen as two sides of the same coin that is the desire of foreign subject in terms of female body as well as space and this further problematises the idea of foreign subject being fetishised.

The depiction of these interracial relationships bordering on fetish has the scope of being counter questioned as a quest for love and the cultural and nationality difference being a mere choice but as Robin Zheng (2016) says, "in an age when racial generalizations and stereotypes are widely recognized to be problematic" (p. 402), fetish cannot be dismissed as a mere preference or choice. The man-woman relationships in *The Shadow Lines* are generated from the sense of fetish that masks itself as a quest for love but the fact this love or desire emerged from the sense of exotic, strangeness and foreignness in terms of national, racial and cultural identities emphasises the fact that these desires are a result

of fetishising the foreign subject. Apart from the argument of fetish that depicts a white woman in a marginalised position against the colonised brown man, the very incidents where the narrator molests May and violates Ila's boundaries depict the universal superiority of men across all nationalities, culture and racial identities. It becomes a means of fetishising the foreign female subject with the sense of strangeness and foreignness felt through cultural difference that includes but goes beyond the differences of racial and national identities.

References

- Bhabha, H. K. (1984). Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse. *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis*, 28, 125-133.
- Brody, J. D. (1998). *Impossible purities: Blackness, femininity, and Victorian culture*. Duke University Press.
- Ghosh, A. (1995). *The shadow lines*. Oxford University Press.
- Hooks, b. (1992). *Black looks: Race and representation*. South End Press.
- Kaul, S. (1995). Separation anxiety: Growing up inter/national in *The shadow lines*. In A. Ghosh, *The shadow lines* (pp. 268-286). Oxford University Press.
- Laskey, D., & Prathim, M. (2017). Bodies as borderwork: From cartographic distance to cosmopolitan concern in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* and Amitav Ghosh's *The shadow lines*. *South Asian Review*, 36(3), 33-49.
- Macaulay, T. B. (1958). Minute on education. In W. T. de Bary (Ed.), *Sources of Indian tradition* (pp. 596-601). Columbia University Press.
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Sen, A. K. (2019). *Mapping the border, mapping the nation: Towards an understanding of the other in Amitav Ghosh's The shadow lines* (Master's thesis, University of Eastern Finland, School of Humanities).
- Srivastava, A. (2022). Exploratory study on sexual fetishism. *The International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 10(1), 338-344.
- Zheng, R. (2016). Why yellow fever isn't flattering: A case against racial fetishes. *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 2(3), 400-419.