



The Mainstream and the Periphery: A Search for Missing Link between Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Aruni Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories*

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Abstract

While discussing Hegel, Bertrand Russel in his *History of Western Philosophy* argues that the philosopher's system of thought and philosophical ideas "could never have arisen if Kant's had not existed" (661). Any system of thought, any literary tradition or any text is a production of earlier thought or tradition where the latter one may pose a dialectical stance or just be a continuation of the former one. Aruni Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories* is one such fictional narrative that can be introspected against Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. Both these texts of Indo-Anglican literary tradition reflect postcolonial concern of nation building and ethnic violence vis-à-vis ethnic identity, some narratorial connections and thematic (dis)similarities. Since Kashyap's text is a much later addition to Indo-Anglican writings, this paper will predominantly focus on how *The House with a Thousand Stories* can be a case of comparative continuation of *The Shadow Lines* from multiple perspectives, and attempts will be made to critically show how and why this comparative method is helpful in inferring greater knowledge about how Indian society in larger and smaller backdrops functions with respect to ethnic identity formation and nation building. While the so-called bifurcation between writings from India's mainland and periphery is debatable, this paper endeavours to critically relook into the debate with respect to textual and thematic (dis)similarities that are very much apparent between the two texts.

Keywords

periphery, Aruni Kashyap, comparative-literature, ethnic identity

In this paper the author shall first look into the historical and, more particularly, philosophical origin of comparison – an ontological and epistemological enquiry into what begot the urge *of* comparison and an urge *for* comparison¹ in the first place, that in later period goes to establish comparative literature as an academic discipline across the globe, before he takes up the analyses of two texts – Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Aruni Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories* that are published twenty-five years apart in 1988 and 2013 respectively.

The disciplinarian compulsion largely informed and shaped by Western model of administrative convenience of studying literature and any other subjects undermines the very notion of Humanities as an academic discipline simply because humanities as a social concept is not bound by any institutional convenience just as spirituality as a notion is not bound by any religious institution. Edward Said's opinion that "Auerbach's life-long interest in the eighteenth-century Neapolitan professor of Latin eloquence and jurisprudence Giambattista Vico is absolutely central" (xii) in understanding Auerbach's stance as a critic especially in his seminal *Mimesis: Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (first published in 1946) self-reflexively establishes the very notion of comparativeness. Now, Vico's theory and postulation that any textual knowledge can only be properly accessed and interpreted if one understands the stance of the author who had written it because the text contains the author's perception and viewpoints is a dialectical development of Cartesian worldview that doesn't take into consideration the historical or the contextual. In a more nuanced and subtle way, Auerbach's concept of 'figura' from his eponymous essay discusses the very possibility of a pre-existence that sets forth the existence. When Auerbach says, "Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons" (53), it actually underlines the comparative method that is inherently ingrained in the interpretative process through which meaning is created and semantic dimensions are disseminated to be understood. The whole essay is actually a deliberation that is based on comparative method – Auerbach establishes his argument(s), for instance, through a comparison between the Old Testament and the New Testament, various Christian writings written over various ages, etc. However, this comparativeness quite naturally recognises polytheistic existence of things (without which there wouldn't be any comparison) that are not always in equal time zone. It thus may seem that this phenomenon of comparison is not a novel issue in the days of Comparative Literature as a distinct discipline in universities in modern time. The urge or primordial case of comparison is traced back to Plato's cave analogy in the *Republic* where "what is known as the world is privileged

¹ The author here intends to draw a distinction between an urge *of* comparison and an urge *for* comparison. Comparison is a compulsion. Urge *of* comparison indicates, in this analogy, a primordial beginning of the compulsion of comparison. Urge *for* comparison, on the other hand, is a historical and methodological praxis that starting from Aristotle's cave analogy and mimetic instinct has been in practice for the continuous production of knowledge. Globally, the institutional practice of comparative literature is all urge *for* comparison, and this urge *for* comparison hardly accounts for the urge *of* comparison.

over a recognition of the conditions of knowing that world” (Ferris 38) and Aristotle's concept of mimesis developed in his seminal *Poetics*. This can also be extended to include Sidney who in his ‘Apology for Poetry’ has dialectically positioned poetry against history and philosophy in that a philosopher’s “knowledge standeth so upon the abstract and general” and the historian is “tied, not to what should be but to what is, to the particular truth of things and not to the general reason of things” (14), whereas poetry combines the philosophy’s abstraction with history’s facts and figures. Plato, Aristotle or Sidney was not professed comparatists, yet their writings were an embryo of what today is called comparative method or comparative literature. This may lead to even greater postulation that the invention of zero and the subsequent quantifiable numbers are also germinators of comparative urge because number one can be seen as comparatively set against its immediate successor of number two. So, two is two because it is not one. Thus, this insight of defining something in terms of what it is not is also applied by Saussure in the *Course in General Linguistics* (originally published in 1916) – colour black is black because it is not any other colours. Such, developments and their various stages very well betray what Bertrand Russel in his *History of Western Philosophy* argues that the philosopher’s system of thought and philosophical ideas “could never have arisen if Kant’s had not existed” (661) and what Harry Levin’s has ensconced in *Grounds for Comparison* that “one could never be a mediaevalist without first becoming a comparatist” (78) – that comparison was an integral methodological axiom in critical literary practices before it was established as a separate department for administrative advantages in universities or other academic institutions and that progress of thoughts occurs through a process that automatically prepares a ground for comparison. These developments starting from Plato to Aristotle, to modern-day Eric Auerbach, Harry Levin, etc. do not properly investigate into the philosophical origin of the urge of comparison, they are all urge for comparison that can be mostly traced back to Plato and his cave analogy. The urge of comparison seems to lie in the figurative use of thought of nature or in the embodiment of nature's mysterious mechanism and abstract workings into concretised forms for the convenience of human understanding and realisation. The concept of one and undivided universe does not beget the comparison, but the compulsion to understand this one and undivided universe in terms of human methodology (humans need methods, otherwise how one can proceed to understand!) created methodological and epistemological praxis leading to divisions that begot the urge of comparison. Every student and scholar of literature or for that matter, of any discipline – be it science, be it commerce, be it technology and engineering – is actually a comparatist without consciously knowing the fact that he is so because it is through comparison that knowledge is produced among the humans. Thus, comparison is a means for production of knowledge. The modern-day rhetorical and literary device of metaphor has a good deal of origin in that urge of comparison, to convey a message of any

nature through another means for the purpose of communication of meaning to another person who is not yet conversant with the speaker's point of view.

While the historical development of various literary periods across all literatures of all places of the planet underline that comparative aspect of literature very well predate the establishment of institutional Comparative Literature in modern backdrop of Cold War, critics like Slobodan Sucur postulates, through David Perkins' *Is Literary History Possible?* and Mario J Valdes, that "a history of literature is by nature difficult to set up because both methodological frameworks and theoretical assumptions have to be taken into account" (94), as compartmentalisation is very difficult in literary history because the way history of a literary period is written at a given time might be challenged by later historians, and there always remains a hidden agenda for compartmentalisation of the historian.

In 'Crossing Borders', Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak critically studies three disciplines to advocate for a possible death of a discipline – Comparative Literature, Area Studies which is no better than a Comparative social studies and Cultural Studies. Through the initial analyses of two reports – Bernheimer Report and Volkman pamphlet, Spivak opines that the origin of both the disciplines of Area Studies and Comparative Literature is complicit and implicit in the Western political atmosphere of Cold War that prompted the "flight of European intellectuals ... from the 'totalitarian' regimes of Europe" (8) with the obvious but latent aim of avoiding the persecution of the regime. She analytically proposes a new Comparative Literature that is aloof from politics, social order and global social challenges like Cold War, large scale migration, diaspora, etc. that begot the Comparative Literature in the first place. Hence, she opines, "I am proposing an attempt to depoliticize in order to move away from a politics of hostility, fear, and half-solutions" (4). Although an Asian in origin and based in Western elite academia, Spivak endeavours to dismantle the Western model of Comparative Literature (and of course Area Studies) that seeks to establish a Western starting point for literary investigations. After proposing that "Comparative Literature must always cross borders" (16) and "Comparative Literature and Area Studies can work together" (15), she outlines a plan of collectively working through 'collectivities' (23) towards an inclusiveness of disciplines. Her critical analysis which is more informed by socio-political events hardly takes into account the philosophical origin of comparison or the urge of comparison. A jovial approach of 'collectivities' into a possible amalgamation of all social science or humanities disciplines harbours the danger of narrowing down the approach of looking at the truth or reality of our planet from a variety of perspectives. In this way, Spivak's death of a discipline is a narrowing-down approach that tends to close things too early, and this narrowing-down approach through 'collectivities' epistemologically belies the very project of doing comparative literature and that too, in western backdrop. Swapn Mazumdar's proposition that "it is upto the Indian comparatists ... to devise methods and tools for literary history and criticism

themselves and let the Indian specimen of CL emanate from our own soil and clime” (14) sounds a bit more realistic because the driving force of colonialism in the socio-political field marched forward with the appropriation of the Indian aesthetics and literary tradition too. Aurobindo’s argumentation in his *The Foundations of Indian Culture* is itself an exercise in comparison where he comparatively looks into the religious, political, historical, social and, above all, cultural confrontation of Indian way of life with the European ways of life. What is to be noticed is that Aurobindo does not deny the mixing of multifaceted aspects of culture, rather he ensconces an assimilation of whatever is alien and foreign to India into the age-old Indian spirit and ethos. This assimilation can create a unique comparative yardstick that is based not just on purely Indian materials but on an assimilation of Western and Indian cultural aspects into what should become an Indian framework of comparison. In a different context but in a similar vein, Vidyasagar also upheld the importance of "comparing the systems of Philosophy of [India] with the New Philosophy of the Western world" (Adhikari 100) that "student will clearly see that the propounders of different systems have attacked each other and pointed out each other’s errors and fallacies" (101). Hence, the author intends to look at Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* and Aruni Kashyap’s *The House with a Thousand Stories* through a comparative model that creates a tradition of narratorial nuances, identity formation, ethnicity bonding and the justification of the issue of violence.

In narrating the horror of the killing that happens at the end of *The Shadow Lines*, Robi, the young narrator’s uncle, ironically says the following words: “Free, he said laughing. You know ... all those pictures of dead people – in Assam, the north-east, Punjab, Sri Lanka, Tripura – people shot by terrorists and separatists and the army and the police, you’ll find somewhere behind it all, that single word; everyone’s doing it to be free” (Ghosh 246). I particularly choose this part to begin with the analyses because it readily establishes connections with the two texts – it’s a classic case of Ghosh’s text, published in 1988, almost unknowingly predicting a text in many ways that would come twenty-five years later in 2013 – Kashyap’s *The House with a Thousand Stories*. While Ghosh’s text explicitly mentions Assam and North-east in connection with killings and murders, it is not just with those negative leanings that the two texts are comparatively linked to each other. If Ghosh’s narration takes into consideration the Indo-Pakistan partition and its fragmented proliferation to societal and familial space, Kashyap’s text echoes such thematic similarities and narratorial links against a different perspective and with different orientations. While both the texts have young narrators – the unnamed narrator in *The Shadow Lines* and Pablo in *The House with a Thousand Stories*, the narration goes on in half-serious and half-casual tone that charts out friendship, familial bonding, identity formation, horror, killings and the last but certainly not the least, stories. It might initially seem far-fetched that a text that is canonically more popular in the academia becomes narratorial and thematic predecessor of a text that is not so popular and certainly

belongs to periphery. But the point is that a centre exists because the periphery exists. In recent times, newer interest has grown in the writers who belong to so called margin as the concept of centre-margin changes over time. Those poets and writers who are initially considered as marginal authors gradually become the centre as they are discussed and given attention variously². It is their writings and voices that make them centre. Thus, in a way, there is a continuous overlap between what is called centre and what is labelled as periphery.

Let me here refer to *The House with a Thousand Stories* where the omniscient narrator says, “There are so many ways of telling the same story. It really depends on what you want to leave the listener with” (Kashyap 210). Almost in similar vein, the narrator’s own grand-mother while narrating the events of her own childhood to the young inquisitive narrator points out in *The Shadow Lines* how life comprises stories only and as they “grew older even (they) almost came to believe in (their) story” (Ghosh 126) and it is up to the people to believe it or not. Thus, quite unobtrusively the world of make-believe enters into the world of belief and credulity, as the differentiating line gets blurred. Tridib, who turns out to be more of a friend of the narrator than an uncle in familial relation, upholds this same importance of stories, “Everyone lives in a story ... my grandmother, my father, *his* father, Lenin, Einstein, and lots of other names ... they all lived in stories, because stories are all there to live in” (182). The traumatic experiences of partition in *The Shadow Lines* and the post-partition fallout of ethnic clash and insurgency in *The House with a Thousand Stories* compel the characters in self-reflexive manner to live only in the world of stories. The murders of Khalil, Tridib and the Jethamoshai, the grand old uncle who resides in Dhaka even after partition, by the running mob when Mayadebi and her sister had gone to bring the ‘old man’ to India evokes two versions of the same story – one is Robi’s and another is May Price’s, and this is an incidental fallout of the partition turmoil that accompanied ethnic cleansing on religious lines.

This same ethnic cleansing in a more nuanced forms of ULFA and SULFA becomes referral points in Kashyap’s novel – the same logic that “everyone’s doing it to be free” (Ghosh 246) is in operation in case of India’s North-eastern part³ also,

² The author recently attended XVI Biennial International CLAI Conference organised by Sikkim University in association with Comparative Literature Association of India between 20 and 22 November 2023 on ‘Interplay of Community, Textuality and Orality: Comparative Perspective on History, Culture and Society’ where scholars and critics have discussed the debate between centre and margin. Prof. Irshad Gulam Ahmed, an Emeritus Professor with Salesian College, Siliguri, has particularly argued in his talk ‘Literature and Marginality: Interplay of Marginality, Orality and Environment in Literature and Culture of North-East India’ about this centering of margin and marginalisation of centre in respect of writers from the North-eastern part of India. In popular imagination, they are conceived as writers writing from the margin, but the fact remains that a center cannot exist unless there is a margin.

³ I prefer to use the term North-eastern part of India instead of any other terms like Northeast or North-east or North-East or even North East because it is a better nomenclature as it only indicates a directional aspect of the region that does not necessarily hint at racial undertone and foster any segregationist attitude. Indian Acts such as The North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act 1971, The North-Eastern Council Act 1971, etc. also use ‘North-Eastern’, which only corroborates my claim.

since various insurgent groups operate with a view to setting a non-amalgamated mixture of ethnicity and demography – which is nothing but an illusion in post-colonial world of hyphenated identities and movement as “the main hope of harmony in our troubled world lies in the plurality of identities” (Sen 16). Demanding a separate country for the Muslims or for any particular religious community is no better than a secessionist attitude that is fostered by an anxiety of religio-ethnic sentiment based on oppression and aggression by the members of other dominant religious community. In similar vein, “the SULFA wanted a separate country called Asom and wanted to free Assam from what they called Indian imperialism” (Kashyap 10). That “everyone’s doing it to be free”-syndrome works in both the texts, but a nuanced difference is to be noted – ethnic clash and violence portrayed in *The House with a Thousand Stories* is a modern post-colonial concern based on socio-ethnic sentiments, while ethnic clash and violence in *The Shadow Lines* is a post-partition fallout based on religio-ethnic sentiments. Now such ethnic sentiments are an inevitable socio-political proliferation of religio-ethnic clash during the partition of 1947. The germinating seed of such ethnic violence, whether it is based on religion or it is a modern post-colonial one, in the Indian sub-continent is sown during the time of partition – if this is an assumption, this is very well portrayed in both the texts. This is one of the outcomes that can be had from this comparative endeavour that a grand narrative of ethnic violence during partition has led to a mini-narrative of ethnic clash in post-colonial and post-partition time. This transition is quite inexorable in an age of fear of amalgamation for the ethnic communities into a possible dissolution of melting pot and simultaneous anxiety of ethnic assertion. India since the times of the Pathans and Mughals has never been a country of melting pot – be it religiously or otherwise, it is the advent of the British as colonisers that created an amalgamation of diversities for administrative convenience. In talking about properties or characteristics of ethnic groups, Kanchan Chandra mentions that “one cause of civil war between ethnic groups is the ‘security dilemma’ introduced by the collapse of the state” (420). Other factors picked by Chandra from the existing pool of arguments that can contribute to ethnic violence include ethnic divisions and state politics vis-a-vis functioning of democracy, ethnic violence and fear, hatred or resentment and intra-ethnic group policing for prevention of inter-ethnic group violence and territorial occupation or concentration of ethnic group. What such pool of arguments as mentioned by Chandra denotes is that factors like ethnic divisions and state policies vis-a-vis functioning of democracy, ethnic violence and fear, hatred or resentment, intra-ethnic group policing for prevention of inter-ethnic group violence and territorial occupation or concentration of ethnic group have become crucial in an era of economic liberalisation and post-colonialism and this is a move away from the religio-ethnic notion of ethnicity during the colonial or pre-colonial times.

In terms of narration, both the novels have same kind of structure in that both mention particular years – 1939 in *The Shadow Lines* and 2002 in *The House with a*

Thousand Stories – as the beginning points, and the narration goes through young incredulous narrators – the young unnamed narrator and Pablo – who develop inseparable bonding with his elders – Tridib and Mridul. Both the novels unavoidably mention killings and murders that are inevitable fall-out of partition. If the murders of Khalil, Tridib and the Jethamoshai at the end of *The Shadow Lines* are direct fall-out of partition project, the “killings that were happening around the state” (Kashyap 31) of Assam are indirect but inevitable consequences of this same partition.

The paper was started with the argument that Humanities as an academic discipline is not bound by any institutional bindings and comparative literature as part of larger Humanities project is not to be limited by any disciplinarian functionaries and methodological axioms. So, there remains an inherent contradiction in comparative literature – it has become a distinct discipline but its inherent nature and functions belie its distinctness as a discipline. In such an inherently apocalyptic discipline of comparative literature, the expectation of any definite outcome based on two texts is also volatile and slippery in the sense that the analytical outcomes are not sacrosanct and final, and herein lies the scope for further development in this particular comparative endeavour between Ghosh’s text and Kashyap’s text. If the urge of comparison, by which a philosophical beginning of comparison is meant and which is informed by ontological and epistemological praxis, originated in human’s compulsive need to encode and decode this mysterious universe through methods, the present comparative endeavour between *The Shadow Lines* and *The House with a Thousand Stories* is a continuation of the urge for comparison which is historically and socially informed.

Two significant aspects come out from the analysis of the two texts taken here. The importance of story that both the novels self-reflexively point out quite assuredly build up or try to have access to contemporary socio-political reality of Indian society. But since literature works not exactly as a direct path to reality but as a mediator of contemporary socio-political conditions, the stories with which the narratives are structured themselves form a discursive reality within the structure of textual narrative. It is understandable that the partition in post-colonial phase evoked umpteen types of incidents and it is quite a challenging task to invoke exactly those incidents and events that had happened in social reality, hence a discursive reality appears to be a structure of narrative, and this is exactly what Ghosh’s novel has unconsciously shown and Kashyap’s novel is nothing but a continuation of this line of thought. Secondly, ethnic sentiments very often leading to ethnic clash and violence as it has happened in the North-eastern part of India are nurtured and fostered by a separatist attitude and this segregationist attitude is also a post-colonial proliferation of creating ethnic nation-state. If in *The Shadow Lines*, the ethnic sentiments are largely informed by religion, as it happened between the two major religious groups – the Hindus and the Muslims, in *The House with a Thousand Stories*, those same ethnic sentiments have come to be shaped by socio-economic concerns for the ethnic groups that inhabit the region.

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