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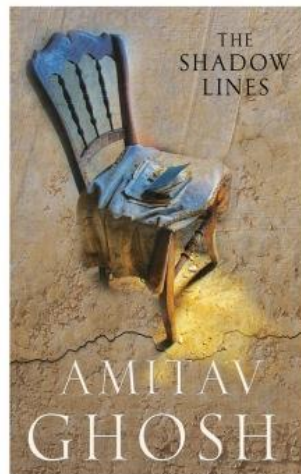
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Theme of Nationalism and Violence in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Introduction

In Indo-Anglian fiction the division of Bengal and suffering caused by partition is first highlighted by Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines*. The focus in this research paper is on the meaning and nuances of political freedom in contemporary life. Communal strife and the irresistible urge of Nationalism are also highlighted by Amitav Ghosh in this novel. Nationalism and political freedom acquired different shades of meaning after independence and partition. Earlier, Indian Nationalism was a weapon utilized by the freedom fighters in their struggle against foreign rulers. Partition was viewed as the price for political freedom from British Colonial rule. But after partition, Nationalism, in the Indian context changed its meaning to exclude people on the other side of the border. A. N. Kaul observes, “The novel, according to the blurb, focuses on nationalism, the Shadow Line we draw between people and nations, which is both an absurd illusion and source of terrifying violence” (Kaul 299).

Tha'mma's Concept of Nationalism

The Shadow Lines undercut nationalism by questioning history on which the idea of a nation is constructed. For a clear understanding of the novel's stance in the connection of nationalism, one has to begin by analyzing Tha'mma's (Grandmother of the narrator of the story) concept of nationalism. To begin with it was the lure of freedom from the colonial rule that ingrained the strong emotion of nationalism in her. She tells her grandson how she was fascinated, “by the stories she had heard about the terrorists.... she had wanted to do something for the terrorists, work for them in a small way, steal a little bit of their glory for hers” (*The Shadow Lines* 39). Sacrifice for the country is the ultimate unifying force for her. It is abstract entity of nationalism that inspires her to bring the old man, her Jethamoshai to India. She says, “I am worried about him, poor old man, all by himself, abandoned in that country.... Imagine what

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it must be to die in another country, abandoned and alone in your old age” (*The Shadow Lines* 135).

Nationalism – Cause of Violence and Destruction

Tha'mma's Nationalism sustains itself by a desire to perpetuate the values of common heritage and by striving towards building a better nation. Therefore, Tha'mma would force her grandson to exercise because, she believes, as she tells him: “You can't build a strong nation...without building a strong body” (*The Shadow Lines* 8). However, a close reading of *The Shadow Lines* clearly explains the grandmother's predicament. Seema Bhaduri says, “With her imagination enslaved to the idea of nationalism, Grandma couldn't see what was so obvious, namely nationalism had destroyed her home and spilled her innocent kin's blood” (Bhaduri 227). Stunned by the death of her nephew Tridib, she develops hatred for Pakistan. Suvir Kaul observes, “Perhaps the crowning irony of *The Shadow Lines* is that almost as soon as Tha'mma realizes that that the legacy of her birth place is not separable from her sense of herself as a citizen of India, her nephew Tridib's death at the hands of a Dhaka mo confirms in her a pathological hatred of them” (Kaul 283). In the war of 1965, she gave away her precious necklace in the war funds. It was the last remembrance of her husband. She explains this sacrifice to her grandson, “I gave it away... 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.” And she continues, “This is the only chance ...The only one. We're fighting them properly at last, with tanks and guns and bombs (*The Shadow Lines* 237).

Strong Militant Nationalism in Tha'mma

There is very strong sense of nationalism and nationhood in Tha'mma. Her ideas about formation Indian states are quite forceful. With the passing of time her sense of freedom grew stronger. Right from the time of British Imperialism she expressed strong views about nationality and nationhood. She dreams of achieving nationhood by the struggle of freedom. She is prepared to pay any price for it. Her sense of Nationalism is so strong that she believes that Ila is misfit in England. She should not live there as she has not sacrificed anything for England. So she has no right to live there. She says, "Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood: with their brothers' blood and their fathers' blood and their sons' blood. They know they're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood" (*The Shadow Lines* 78). Her strong sense of militant nationalism is evident when she explains forcefully to her grandson that he should follow British example to achieve freedom. She tells him, "War is their religion. That's what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this 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?" (*The Shadow Lines* 78).

Unsound Nationalist Principles of Jethamoshai

Similar narrow mindedness and unsound nationalist principles are expressed by Jethamoshai, Tha'mma's Uncle. When she insisted to take him to India, he expressed strong but foolish nationalist impulse. He tells Tha'mma, "I understand very well, I know everything, I understand everything. Once you start moving you never stop. That's what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: I don't believe in this India- Shindia. It's all very well, you're 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 have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here" (*The Shadow Lines* 215).

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Shadow Lines as the Source of Unity

In spite of the unsound philosophy the words of Jethamoshai have some truth hidden behind them. The futility of border lines or the imaginary lines is evident in his words. The narrator also realized that the nations are divided by the shadowy lines drawn on the maps by the politicians. These shadowy lines, in fact, draw people even closer than earlier. These shadow lines act like the source of unity between nations and the people who live in them. He uses the image of looking – glass to show that Dhaka and Calcutta are like mirror – images which reflect each other. The narrator comments: “What had they felt, I wondered, when they discovered that they had created not a separation, but a yet-undiscovered irony - the irony that killed Tridib: the simple fact that there had never been a moment in the 4000-year-old history of that map when the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines - so closely that I, 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 by the line that was to set us free - our looking-glass border” (*The Shadow Lines* 233). Thus Nationalism is one of the shadowy lines – imaginary and artificial.

Validity of National Boundaries

The Shadow Lines deals with the international theme of the validity of national boundaries. It raises a few very important questions against the backdrop of increasing city – state disputes and its demarcations on the maps. For Ghosh, all such demarcations are shadow lines, the arbitrary and invented divisions. Contrary to the belief of Tha'mma and her old uncle, these shadow lines cannot divide a memory or experience. Tha'mma is an ardent nationalist. She

is baffled to find, “her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality” (*The Shadow Lines* 152). It is because the partition of the Bengal has made her foreigner in her homeland Dhaka. She is forced to realize that no amount of bloodshed can make the borders real. Before flying to Dhaka she asks her son, “Whether she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane” (*The Shadow Lines* 151). In the course of conversation, Tha'mma questions some of the fundamentals of the idea of nationalism: “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 anybody stopping us. What was it all for then – partition and all the killing and everything – if there isn't something in between” (*The Shadow Lines* 151).

Liberal Nationalism

Except Tha'mma's militant nationalism every other character of *The Shadow Lines* has quite liberal view about nation and their nationality. This novel portrays the friendship and antipathy between various generations of an upper middle class Bengali family and an English family over three generations. The friendship of these two families began with Tresawsen and Justice Datta – Chaudhuri. Their heirs Mrs. Price, the daughter of Tresawsen and Mayadebi and her elder sister Tha'mma, continue to maintain this friendly relation, irrespective of division of nationality and religion. Also, it is the time when the British colonialism and imperialism was at its zenith in India. Tridib's father was taken to London for an operation and Mayadebi finds the environment of London very friendly. She tells Tresawsen: “Everyone was so much nicer now; 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 how her husband was, and when he was to

have his operation” (*The Shadow Lines* 66). Thus, Ghosh has presented here the most humane side of English characters.

Nationality for Third Generation

After depiction of liberal Nationalism, Ghosh shows another side of English people. Following the exhilaration of showing humanity, Ghosh shows a true English picture, a white man’s disdain for a brown one. Nick Price, Ila, Tridib and May Price represent the third generation of their family. Tridib and May fall in love with each other and Ila and Nick even marries. However, Nick marries Ila only for the sake of money. He often neglects Ila because she is an Indian. Even in the school time, the narrator imagines, “Ila walking alone because Nick Price was ashamed to be seen by his friends, walking home with an Indian (*The Shadow Lines* 76).

Cosmopolitan Citizens and Their Nationality

On the other hand, a number of Indian characters in the novel have been presented as anglophiles or pro – English. For instance, Ila has been brought up and educated in England and she seeks to escape from the conventional atmosphere in India. At once, she tells narrator angrily: “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 you! ... Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you” (*The Shadow Lines* 89). Her mother has been called “Queen Victoria” for her mannerism and for her lordship over household servants like white memsahib. Her father was an ICS Officer. Ila, her parents – Jatin and Queen Victoria and her grandparents – Saheb and Mayadebi are natives of India by birth only. In reality they are all the citizens of the cosmopolitan world. A.N. Kaul aptly

says: “It is true that for the privileged Datta-Chaudhuri’s nationality has ceased to have any significance and crossing national frontiers means nothing more to them than a smooth transition through customs and immigration at identical airports” (Kaul 303).

Partition and Communal Violence

The partition of India has been described as the greatest divorce in history, which created the sense of plunder, terror and loot within the two nations. In the novel, the family of Datta-Chaudhuri’s and Tha’mma stayed in East Bengal, the new Bangladesh. They switched over to India long before the partition but their hearts stayed in their house. *The Shadow Lines*, is a constant struggle of the author to undo the demarcations to prevent the establishment of the borders. The nameless narrator becomes the medium for Ghosh to express his own thoughts and feelings. He is the only character who binds together the fragmentary structure of the novel. Nivedita Bagchi observes: “The ‘story’ or the chief narrative line evolves sporadically and is constantly interrupted and diverted by other narratives. The only fixed centre is that of the chief narrative voice through whom the other narratives are filtered” (Bagchi 188). The narrator remembers a violent incident when in Jammu and Kashmir a sacred relic known as Mu-i-Mubarak was disappeared from its place in 1963. It is believed to be a hair of the Prophet Mohammed himself. This incident is followed by innumerable black flag demonstrations. However, surprisingly, there was not a single incident of Hindu – Muslim animosity in the valley. Soon, Pakistan provoked the Muslims of India and Pakistan alike. In East Pakistan a procession turned violent and it resulted in loot and bloodshed.

Impact of Communal Violence

The narrator feels concerned with the impact of the communal strife and violence on the people of Calcutta and Dhaka. Novy Kapadia rightly points out: “Amitav Ghosh’s greatest triumph is that the depiction of communal strife in Calcutta and erstwhile East Pakistan, and its continuation in contemporary India, is very controlled and taut. There are no moralizing or irrelevant digressions. Lucidity and compactness is achieved primarily by his unusual narrative device” (Kapadia 208). The narrator remembers an early January morning, when school buses came only with only a dozen boys. This was unusual as the boys told him that ‘they’ had poisoned the Tala Tank. But nobody knew who ‘they’ were. All over the city rumors played a vital role in spreading fear among people. The narrator also felt fear as his grandmother expressed her wish to visit her uncle and ancestral house in Dhaka. At the time of communal violence she was in Dhaka. During such retaliation, while returning back, Tridib and her old Jethamoshai were killed violently by the communal mob.

In a book review, Girish Karnad observes: “The grandmother’s visit to the ancestral home....is surely one of the most memorable scenes in Indian fiction. Past and future meet across religious, political and cultural barriers in a confusion of emotions, ideals, intentions and acts, leading to a shattering climax” (Karnad 5).

Even after fifteen years, Robi tremble like a leaf on this death. May considered that she was responsible for the death of Tridib. She was relieved of her guilt after fifteen years when the narrator visited May in the end of the novel. The narrator came home with his understanding of Tridib’s death. It was the desire of the narrator to be in Tridib’s shoes. And, this is exactly what he did in the end of the novel when he and May, “lay in each other’s arm quietly...” (*The Shadow Lines* 252).

Nationalism is the Source of Terrifying Violence

In one of his pioneering work, Benedict Anderson argues that, “nation is an imagined political community. It is imagined because members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 15). In the influence of print media the two communities which had been living together without any previous record of riots and massacre, went on rampaging because the line of separation was marked not only on earth but also in their minds and hearts. The nationalism which earlier united the nation like India and brought an awakening for their rights to expel the British had turned sharp and divided the two nations and two communities. Thus “nationalism is the source of terrifying violence.” The concept of Nationalism brings about a tragedy in the personal life of Tridib and May and thousands of other citizens, to whom they represent. The Nationalism is terrifying in the sense that it glorifies its own nation and leads to hatred of other countries, their citizens, religion and community.

Conclusion

The quest for political freedom in *The Shadow Lines* makes the novel very contemporary. After all, the longing for freedom is universal and a primitive urge among the human beings. The only alternative towards which Ghosh appears to be inclined is that of Globalism instead of Nationalism. Tridib’s letter to May is the evidence of Ghosh’s intention. In the letter, Tridib expresses his desire “to meet her, May – as a stranger, in a ruin. He wanted them to meet as the completest of strangers – strangers-across-the-seas – all the more strangers because they knew each other already. 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” (*The Shadow Lines* 144). This letter can be read as a wish for dismantling the world order based on states and nations. It is implied that inside the borders one can only be a citizen and not a human being. The narrator says, “It seemed to me, then, that within this circle there were only states and citizens; there were no people at all” (*The Shadow Lines* 233). Thus, the removal of all boundaries appears to be the only way for the ‘citizens’ to become ‘people.’

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