

## Nationalism and Partition of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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### Abstract

Indian history is divided into past, present and future. The true national identity lies on the individual awareness and the nation's heritage. The present paper is intended to examination of Amitav Ghosh treats the theme of nationalism in his "*The Shadow Lines*" (1988) and how he describes the concept of nationalism. The continuous prompt of the nation by our ancestors has put into a questioning attitude of people recently. Ghosh views the traditional values by his animated and unendurable ideas. Amitav Ghosh has focused on the political interference in contemporary world in relation to her work "*The Shadow Lines*". The political influence and violence in contemporary world are aptly marked out in this novel.

The partition provided the writers with the occasion to write about the plight of the people in the subcontinent in order to bring home mainly to the western world, the impact of British rule, which had previously boasted of civilizing mission. The partition theme in Indian novels in English set the dystopian tune, which would be later on carried on to the tone of the postcolonial theories. Post colonialism began as recognition of the dominant post-war economic and political conditions which were prevalent all over the world.

Amitav Ghosh explores the ideas of nationhood and Diasporas ideas that involve relationships between individuals belonging to the same or to different communities that sometimes transgress and transcend the shadow lines of political borders. *The Shadow Lines* represents Ghosh's most direct confrontation with nationalism and national identity and it is simultaneously about each character's personal identity. Both in Political Science and in Geography there is a specific definition of a country or a state. The word Country, however, bears a specific meaning to a man. A man's entire entity of present, past as well as future is associated with his own country or native land or homeland. In general, the part of land where one is born becomes one's homeland, native land or motherland.

*The Shadow Lines* is the novel deal exclusively with the consequences of the Partition, and mainly concerned with the Partition on the Bengal border. It is important to note that Ghosh happens to be the only major Indian-English novelist who is preoccupied with the Bengal Partition. There was a collective expression of grief, a demonstration of all religions in which Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus alike to took part in. In January 1964 Mu-I-Mubarak was recovered and the city of Srinagar erupted with joy. But soon after the recovery, riots broke out in Khulna and a few people were killed. In pursuing its inquiry in the logic of boundaries in the

postcolonial context, *The Shadow Lines* takes up the challenge of representing the complexity of national identity.

*The Shadow Lines* is the mirror image, which runs throughout the novel as a sign of those relations that paradoxically connect nation and individuals even as they divide them. The mirror image in the novel foregrounds the idea of mutual contractedness not only between the narrators and the other characters that surround him but also between the cities of London, Dhaka and Calcutta. As he discovers new meaning and imagines new connection between him and the other characters perception and experiences of space, the adult narrator comes to understand that Muslim Dhaka and Hindu Calcutta are essentially mirror image of each other separated by a looking Glass border.

The cause of the riots that killed Tridib in Dhaka also causes the Calcutta riots in which he was trapped as a child. As Thamma believes across the border there existed another reality. Thus in the novel Thamma supremely confident in her belief that real borders separate nations is taken aback when told that she would not be able to see any borderline between India and east Pakistan from the plane. She asks, if there's no difference both sides will be the same. Thamma's conceptual mapping of the nation, which mirrors that of nationalism, is based upon the unifying effects of Tradition represented in her mind under the guise of warfare that constitutes the main ingredient of a country's territorial integrity.

Ghosh imagines and creates those situations from history and see what happens to an individual life when he/she is part of historical events. History also records the changes and chronology of events. Literature need not necessarily record the changes in chronological manner but represents such changes. Ghosh represents the changes that take place at individual level and at national and international levels.

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. So, there is the character name Thamma, the grandmother of the unnamed narrator through whom the issue of the Bengal Partition and the whole idea of Nation, Nationalism and Nationhood gets discussed. The characters and stories are rooted in the solid soil of reality of human life. Ghosh's writings penetrate through various forms and institutions of power in society and seek to comprehend human existence in totality.

Power structures have always prevailed and controlled an individual's life. One interesting fact about the organization of the characters within novels is that each character is an individual and integral to the flow of the story. He also interweaves the story in a manner that ruptures any hierarchy of importance amongst characters. So if Tridib is an outstanding character in *The Shadow Lines*, the roles of narrator, May and grandmother are equally vital. Tridib, the eccentric historian cousin through whom the idea of history being challenging gets highlighted. Then there is the third generation Ila, the narrator's second cousin through whom the author brings to fore the issues of Diasporas and racism.

The narrator goes to London for his doctorate work but he feels that he is not new to the place. It is a place which is already known to him. He has seen London through the eyes of his mentor and inspiration Tridib. Tridib's vivid account of London and the narrator's extraordinary imagination makes him feel that he has already visited the place before. The narrator stays in London for about a year but his life is most affected by Dhaka that he never personally visits in his life.

The narrator has seen Dhaka through the eyes of his grandmother only. And it is the tragedy that takes place in Dhaka which changes his life forever. He loses his mentor Tridib on the roads of Dhaka when he is killed by a rioting mob along with Thamma's uncle. The nations were divided on the pretext of religions and millions of people migrated from one part to the other. During this migration thousands of people lost their lives and millions were rendered homeless. But the memories of the people could not be divided. People who migrated to the either side always had the memories of their place of birth. They always had in their minds the picture of their nation where they were born and brought up; the nation where they grew up playing in the mud and running in the streets with friends. The line that was drawn by the politicians to divide one nation into two could never divide the sentiments and memories of the people.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* very interestingly presents this fact to the readers through different characters, Thamma being the most obvious one. Thamma epitomizes nationalist movements of India and has been an inspiration for the narrator. He uses his grandmother's eyes to see her life in Dhaka as a young girl, her uncle and cousins, the other side of the big house where everything was upside down. Thamma represents India's national identity in the Nationalist Movement. She is a migrant from Dhaka but her ardent love of India cannot be questioned. She goes back to Dhaka after about 20 years to bring her nonagenarian uncle to Calcutta since there is a revolution going on in Dhaka.

In Dhaka she realizes how alien she has become to the place where she was born. She feels as if she is a foreigner. Tridib at this point makes it more vivid when he says, "But you are a foreigner now, you're as foreigner here as May – much more than May, for look at her, she doesn't need a visa to come here" (*The Shadow Lines*, 195). The remark of Tridib shocks the readers. Thamma's visit to Dhaka gives us a peep into her psyche and raises a lot of questions about the lines drawn between nations. While filling in a form in Dhaka, Thamma swiftly fills in her nationality as 'Indian' without any hesitation but she starts pondering while filling in her birth place as Dhaka (Bangladesh). There are a series of questions that arise in her mind. Whether birth in a country gives one the right to nationality, how one's nationality changes if the nation is demarcated. Whether the lines that divide nations also dividing the memories. And like wise.

The author does give a very plausible answer to these questions through the character of Jethamoshai, Thamma's uncle. He says, "I don't believe in this India-Shindia. ...suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere. What will you do then? Where will you move to...? As for me, I was born here and I'll die here" (SL 213). And eventually he

becomes the victim of the communal rioting in Dhaka. Narrator's mentor and inspiration Tridib also dies in the incident.

The death of Ukil Babu, Thamma's uncle clearly throws forward another question i.e. whether people are safe even in their country. Ukil Babu boasts about his country and says he will die where he was born but whether he ever expected to die like this. Thamma, though born in Dhaka in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan), is a true Indian at heart. She used to dream when she was in college to be a part of the militant groups which were fighting for India's freedom. She was fascinated by the acts of dare-devilry performed by the freedom fighters against the British imperialists. She didn't know much about the freedom struggle but she was so ardent a lover of nationalism that she was ready to even wash utensils, cook food and wash clothes if she could become a part of the freedom movement.

Riots spread to Dhaka and Calcutta. The toll increased to thousands. Despite the presence of two armies of Pakistan and India, stray incidents of arson and looting continued for a few days. There were innumerable cases of the Muslims in East Pakistan giving shelter to the Hindus, often at the cost of their own lives and equally of the Hindus protecting the Muslims. "But they were ordinary people, soon forgotten ... not for them any Martyrs memorials or Eternal Flames" (*The Shadow Lines*, 230).

The situation depicted is similar to the anti-Sikh riots that Ghosh witnessed in Delhi, following the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Though Calcutta and Dhaka belong to two different nations, separated from each other by the borders etched upon the map, the two places are closely bound to each other that the narrator had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other (*The Shadow Lines*, 233). Hence what happens in Dhaka will be certainly reflected in Calcutta even when concerned authorities keep quiet about the event. The narrator comes to the conclusion that the lines separating the two nations are only shadow lines.

*The Shadow Lines* can be read as destabilizing the fixed, binary logic imposed on nation of otherness, identity, history and memory in the construction of nationalist boundaries. Thus in *The Shadow Lines* Ghosh represents national identity in a way which forces us to acknowledge the ambivalence of boundaries, even as we accept that partition was necessary. On a metaphoric level is what Tridib tries to do by jumping out of the sure safety of his car during the riots and running towards the Muslim old man he barely knows.

The force and appeal of nationalism cannot be wished away, just as death by a communal mob in the bye-lanes of old Dhaka. Dhaka has been Thamma's birth place but her nationality is Indian. As a young girl, she had thought of fighting for freedom in east Bengal. But those very same people for whom she had been willing to lay down her life are enemies in 1964. Feelings of nationalism had after all motivated the fight against the British.

The violence it unleashed by the action of a few fanatics the vengeance that the ordinary Hindu, Muslim and Sikhs wreaked on each other worsened our social sense, distorted our political judgments and deranged our understanding of moral righteousness. *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 then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi were assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards. To begin with supposedly State sponsored, these riots in their magnitude were comparable to the earlier communal agitation 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 creates 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 Shadow Lines* is the Partition novel examined in this book that really questions the concept of the border, questions very seriously whether the shadow line that we inscribe to separate people into different nations has any validity, or whether it is an absurd illusion. It is Ghosh's contention in this novel that borders themselves are fictive and illusive, that they defeat and negate the very reason behind their ostensible existence. Thamma in *The Shadow Lines* inquires whether she would be able to see the boundary between India and East Pakistan. Ghosh writes through this character, and if there is no difference both side will be the same, it will be just like it used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all for them? Partition and all the killing and everything if there is not something in between. (*The Shadow Lines*, 151)

Common prudence of Thamma fails to understand the justification of creating two nations. D. K. Pabby, while presenting comparative study of themes in his article viz. theme of partition and freedom in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* comments: In *The Shadow Lines*, the development and growth of Thamma character encapsulate the futility and meaninglessness of political freedom which was otherwise supposed to usher in an era of peace and prosperity for all. (*The Shadow Lines*, 156)

Ghosh has raised a question that whether the partition is a solution to the problems of social unrest on religious grounds or political motivation. The partition creates the feeling of humiliation and agony for the dear and near ones who are compelled to migrate from their home or birth-place merely for the reasons based on whims of political solution of the problem faced by the nation. Shobha Tiwari in her book *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Study* comments: Ghosh questions the very basis of modern nation states. It does not matter how many states exist in a continent or subcontinent. It does not change the well-being of its people. Nationhood itself is a mirage because it is not based on any logic. When nature draws line in the form of mountains, oceans, rivers, it is real. But manmade borders are shallow and unjustifiable.

Three perspectives of borders are provided by three characters belonging to three adjacent generations as figured in *The Shadow Lines*. The first is spoken by Thamma, the protagonist's grandmother; the second by her uncle, Jethamoshai (i.e. the protagonist's granduncle); and the third by Robi, Thamma's nephew, who is roughly the same age as the

protagonist and is his friend. Jethamoshai had lived in a world where borders were not of paramount importance, and what was regarded as important was one's sense of belonging to the place one was born and brought up in.

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Thus, Ghosh explores the theme of partition of a modern nation and has asserted futile action of the political machinery in power. *The Shadow Lines* thus puts such ideological themes before the reader for evaluation of such political motives based on illogical axis. Culture is a process of circulation that has nothing to do with national borders. As Robert Dixon in a critique of Ghosh argues that the characters in Ghosh's novels do not occupy discrete cultures, but dwell in travel in the cultural spaces that flow across borders in the shadow lines drawn around modern nation states.

The partition is a vivid manifestation of the claim that post-colonial nation are founded in a bloody in a severance of the umbilical cord, one that fortified border between nation states with irrational and remorseless violence. The discourse of nationalism, however, affects to make sense of the absurd loss of lives that occurs the novel made the reader to discover that world is not a simple place that can see in atlas but there are so many inexorable facts, hidden in that solid lines as it leads to political aggression and violent bloodshed.

The boundaries between nation are like shadow lines, of hatred and hostility out of national sentiments. The narrator also shows how ordinary people try their best to seek mutual sympathy among various ethnic groups of the subcontinent. There are some people like Thamma believe in not only drawing lines as part of faith but respecting them with blood. The border that carved at the time of partition has led to further brutality in the form of those riots, pogroms and organized historical distortions and cultural depletions with which the history of independent India replete.

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