

Fragmented Nationalism: A Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines***Dr. Arpita Sardar**

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Amitav Ghosh, along with other postcolonial Indian English writers such as Vikram Seth and Salman Rushdie, plays a remarkable role in liberating English literature from the colonial yoke. The present article attempts to address Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* in light of the problems of national identity. This paper also delves deeper into the outcome of historical events like the freedom movement in Bengal, the partition of India in 1947 and communal riots. The novel presents a cosmopolitan urban scenario where incidents occur in London and Dhaka, whereas the narrator resides in Calcutta. Ghosh tries to capture the nuances of human minds about nation and nationhood. A sense of historical reality in the tangent of space and time looms large in the Ghosh literary canon which becomes a form of creative art; thus, the works achieve universal appeal and timelessness. The paper attempts to identify the different layers of displacement -social, cultural, and psychological.

Keywords: displacement, diaspora, identity, nationalism, partition

The theme of diaspora finds its expression in novels such as *The Dark Dancer* by B. Rajan and Attia Hossain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* as we find it in *The Shadow Lines*. The paper critically examines how displacement plays a crucial role in shaping and conditioning the major characters' mindset; thus, making them accustomed to their changed socio-political scenarios. Leela Gandhi opines in her book, "Diaspora evokes the specific traumas of human displacement- whether of the Jews or of the Africans scattered in the

service of slavery and indentured-post colonialism is concerned with the idea of cultural dislocations contained within this term” (210). As a matter of fact, diaspora does not simply mean geographical dispersal but also interrogates identity memory. Ghosh can be termed as a diasporic writer along with Bharati Mukherjee and Hanif Kureishi. All the above writers' writings deal with 'displacement' that talks about narratives of journeys on account of economic compulsions. The term brings forth an eternal quest for identity and it observes the oscillation between home country and host country. Usually, it is seen that homogeneity is imposed on a particular religion, community or nation and nuanced discrepancy is overlooked under the carpet. Ghosh highlights how this notion of homogeneity is questioned for the sake of a unified nation. Putting a label on any nation is illusory and does not hold any practicability. Ghosh's work engages in figuring out how culture traces history and how different cultural norms get interspersed by interaction with one another. In the end, this novel exhibits the physical and emotional bond between the narrator and Mary Price which delineates the meeting of two cultures -Indian and British. This is portrayed as a live human experience that transcends the artificial borders of nation and race. Published in 1988, the novel underscores the connection between personal memories and collective national identities, highlighting the complexities of political and regional atrocities. With the help of storytelling and characterization, Ghosh demonstrates how memory plays a crucial role in shaping national identities. Ghosh's narrative delves into the human psyche when faced with the emotional turmoil of nationalism. *The Shadow Lines* occupy a significant place in postcolonial literature because of its broader socio-political context.

The Shadow Lines, the most celebrated work of Ghosh, highlights the aftermath of the Partition, and the novel stands as a critique of nationalism through the process of revisions and redefinitions. The fiction demonstrates the cultural formations wherein one's nationality

and individual identity may be constructed. Ghosh recapitulates a situation where an individual faces an important historical event. Nevertheless, the novel demonstrates such changes in an individual's life when one has to deal with historical incidents. The fictional discourse talks about a Bengali family that spans over three generations. Interestingly, *The Shadow Lines* highlights the growth of Calcutta as a city and the development of India as a nation. The issue of partition and its subsequent effect on nation, nationalism and nationhood is reflected in the characterization of Tha'mma, the grandmother of the unnamed narrator. The novel revolves around the narrator's family in Calcutta and Dhaka and their affinity towards an English family in London. The narrator's grandmother's relationship with her sister's granddaughter Ila further problematizes the notion of nationalism and migrant cosmopolitanism. Nevertheless, the novel brings forth the issues of nationalism that itself is illusory and violent at times. The fictional discourse uncovers the complexity of cosmopolitanism and focuses on the seamless narrative of national identity. Interestingly, the narrator comes across multiple versions of national and cultural identities that mould the sensibility of the narrator. The unnamed narrator is involved in engaging to introspect the lives of his people around in the imaginative renewal of time, space and the historical past. He does so through the eyes of Tridib. The theme of nationalism marks the transition from a national freedom struggle to disillusionment in the diaspora. The leading characters of the novel i.e., the grandmother, Uncle Tridib, cousin Ila and Robi all constitute in consolidating the fragmented notions of nationalism in this literary work of Ghosh. The novel aptly demonstrates how the natives face trauma and existential crisis because of the civil strife and communal riots. Despite the geographical borders, communal riots intrude into another nation and disrupt the cultural life of others. Thus, the lines evaporated with time. Ghosh highlights the intersection and interaction between individual sense of national identity with historical past. Moreover, the novel serves as a potential link between the past and the present. The

characters often find themselves enmeshed in political and social change. Thus, the personal gets entangled with larger social shifts.

All the characters and the incidents have some connection either with the past or the present. These are deeply rooted in the solid soil of reality in human life. Each character is important and contributes largely to the flow of the story. Ghosh articulates how *The Shadow Lines* blurs the invisible and symbolic lives that divide people. The intermingling of past and present, personal with the political is potent enough to create a multilayered narrative. Furthermore, the novel explores how the dynamics of interpersonal relationships transcend geographic and cultural boundaries. It is worth analysing the fact that the narrator's grandmother embodies the ideals of the Nationalist movement and highlights the need for India's national identity. Ghosh condemns the futility of a divided nation i.e., the East and another West. The inevitable outcome of this division records social and political unrest. Neither does it soothe the mental agony of displaced persons. Tha'mma in *The Shadow Lines* is sceptical about whether she would be able to witness the borderline between India and East Pakistan. She observes, "And if there is no difference both sides 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" (Ghosh 151). Tha'mma, one of the most important characters of the novel, casts a remarkable influence on the unnamed narrator's psyche. Along with Ila, Tha'mma can also be regarded as a case of postmodern schizo-fragmentation, as she finds herself stuck between past and present. She embraces the present by shunning aside the oblivious past. Arif M. Khan comments: "Thamma fails to understand that the border is like a mirror, a looking-glass border, wherein one looks beyond to find self – reflection which mirror conflict and riots for the sake of preserving self-an exercise which seems arbitrary and meaningless." (60)

This novel is a sharp critique of the theme of partition wherein the issues of social and political unrest are addressed. Moreover, the partition is wholly responsible for people migrating from their home or birthplace, thus making the partition a more poignant phenomenon. Shobha Tiwary comments, "Ghosh questions the very basis of modern nation-states. It does not matter how many states exist in a continent or sub-continent. 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 lines in the form of mountains, oceans, rivers, it is real. But manmade borders are shallow and unjustifiable" (53). The literal meaning of shadow lines denotes the lines that separate people into different nations. As matter of fact, it is Ghosh who believes that borders are full of illusions and imagination. One of the noteworthy features of this novel lies in the fact that it spans three contiguous generations (Jethamoshai, Thamma and Robi), and it underscores the narrator's perspective that circumscribes all the previous ideologies regarding nationhood. It can be perceived from the novel that the lines in the atlas are not a simple space, rather the lines denote the much deeper annotations where political outbursts and violent bloodsheds do occur. The shadow lines among the states foreground hatred and animosity in the name of preserving national sentiments. Tha'mma, a prominent figure, attempts to free her nation from the clutches of the British by helping the activities of the nationalist leaders. While Tridib and the narrator believe in the intellectual imagination constructed by the imperialistic demand of the Eurocentric zeal, Ila adopts the means of Western culture and gets criticized by Tha'mma. Tha'mma's anti-imperialist and jingoistic attitude stands in sharp contrast to Ila's conceited superiority. The dualism in Ila's personality i.e., conventionalism and liberalism make her a complete misfit in London and in Calcutta as well. Surprisingly, Ila and Nick's marriage goes through cross-cultural relationships. Both Nick and Ila have different expectations from their marriage. While Ila bears romanticism towards her marriage, Nick's only purpose is to prosper in his career through the marriage as

Ila is the daughter of high ranked Indian diplomat. Ila's fragmented identity makes her anomalous in the Indian as well as in British cultural milieu. As the novel progresses, it is also seen "as a sort of erotic re-enactment of his (Nick) own frustrated cosmopolitanism" (Hueso 163). Nevertheless, Ila faces racial discrimination at school in London. It is expressed in the novel:

Nick didn't stop to help Ila. He ran all the way back. . . Nick didn't want to be seen with Ila. Ila didn't have any friends in school . . . Then that day something happened in Ila's class, and I think Nick got to hear of it. He ran back even earlier than usual and went straight up to his room... An hour or so later, just when we were beginning to worry about Ila, a policeman brought her back. She was a bit bruised, but otherwise all right. She never told us what happened but she didn't go back to school after that. (Ghosh 76)

May Price, another prominent character in the novel, finds herself in complete disillusionment when she comprehends the mysterious pull between herself and Tridib. May is forced to live with the death of Tridib and she is yet to come to terms with Tridib's sudden demise. She holds herself responsible for Tridib's death in communal riots. In retaliation to Tridib's death, May lives a recluse life where she is seen to relinquish all the luxuries and comforts of life. She comments:

I was safe you see—I could have gone right into that mob, and they wouldn't have touched me, an English memsahib, but he, he must have known he was going to die. For years I was arrogant enough to think I owed him his life. But I know now I didn't kill him; I couldn't have, if I'd wanted. He gave himself up; it was a sacrifice. I know I can't understand it, I know I mustn't try, for any real sacrifice is a mystery. (Ghosh 252)

The characters' eternal quest for identity is conducive to an understanding of the meaning of boundary and eventually, it leads to the blurring of the shadow lines among nations. Their sensibilities transcend beyond boundaries and bring forth their individuality as real selves. Variegated interpretations of theories like postcolonialism and poststructuralism are of immense value for upholding national identities. The term 'nationalism' signifies an ideology that centres upon the upliftment of a particular nation. The following quotation is important to note:

Nationalism was, first of all, a doctrine of popular sovereignty. The people must be liberated - that is free from any external constraints; they must determine their own destiny and be masters in their house; they must control their own resources; they must obey only their inner voice... The people must be united; they must dissolve all internal divisions; they must be gathered together in a single historic territory, a homeland; and they must have legal equality and share a single public culture.
(Hutchinson and Smith 4)

All three female characters suffer because of cultural dislocation. They undergo several social, historical and political upheaval. Tha'amma's postcolonial rationality is entwined with Ila's diasporic predicament. The myth of nationality is dissected through the postmodern cultural space of liminality. Their sense of anxiety is calmed down when discordance and uncertainty set in. Tridib's stories of the past introduce the narrator to key historical events such as the freedom struggle and the subsequent partition of Bengal. It is important to note here that the idea of nationalism is not static but fluid. It can be subjective in nature. Unfortunately, this sentiment is manipulated for religious and political gain. At times, the manipulation yields in communal riots which pose a threat to the basic nature of humanity. Whereas Tha'mma's sense of nationalism remains quite vociferous throughout the novel,

Tridib emphasises calmness and sanity in the fiction. Being principled and a man of morals, Tridib's values are immensely steeped in Indian ethos and culture. Robi, born in the postcolonial era, contends for a unitary identity which does not entwine a fractured sense of self like decolonisation and partition. After the incident of Tridib's death, Robi articulates what it means to be a free person and becomes sceptical about nationhood. The following lines from the novel are pertinent here,

Free...You know, if you look at the pictures on the front pages of the newspapers...dead people in Assam, the north east, Punjab, Sri Lanka, Tripura—people shot by terrorist and separatists and the army and the police...everyone's doing it to be free...Why don't they draw thousands of little lines...and give every little place a new name? What would it change? ...How can anyone divide a memory?
(247)

The Shadow Lines serves as a critique of nationhood. In the background of the contrasting views of Tha'mma's dominant version of nationhood and Robi's radical notion of freedom, Ghosh points out the limitations of the ideology of nationhood. At times, nationalism seems to have omitted the issue of gender, nation and cultural hegemony. Nations try to impose many restrictions like passports and visas in order to make a separate identity for their people. It also denotes one country's animosity toward the others. Ghosh contextualizes the notion of 'nationalism' in this novel by merging and blurring the past, present and future. A sense of nationalism is subjected to change with varying degrees of identity of culture. The identity crisis can be visualized throughout the novel.

The title of the novel itself insinuates the fact that there is no specific spectrum of space either geographically or culturally. The various tangent of space gets blurred into one another; alien space into native space and cultural space into geographical space. Time and space both are variable constraints, they can move to and fro freely. The shadow lines of the

atlas highlight the blurring of border lines. The title of the novel has a direct connotation that the boundaries are 'shadows'. The borderlines are of less importance because they have been created by the people in power. This work of fiction interrogates the notion of nationalism of people who forcefully or willingly cross geographical borders. As Meenakshi Mukherjee opines: "Time in this novel can be illusory and concrete at the same time and likewise space can be fluid even when held solidly within the concrete scaffolding of a house or confirmed within the firm outlines etched national boundaries on a map" (135). The lines draw distance between nations which poses a serious hindrance between nations which poses a serious hindrance to the problem if humans are different from each other. The statement illustrates the fact that one nation appears to be different from the other; in reality, they are just reflections of each other. The two parts *Going Away & Coming Home* aptly demonstrate that the movements denote a journey that was a search for precisely that fixed point which permits the proper use of verbs of movement. It denotes the beginning of diasporic movements. At times, the precarity lies in the fact that diasporic people are forced to live on the margins, making them the most vulnerable entities. Nationality and Identity are synonymous as both are linked to the individual existence. Hence, the significance of the shadow lines might be imperceptible to the eye but holds greater importance as perceived through the following lines:

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. (Ghosh 237)

Again, Imagination is no less important in comparison to the role of memory. Travelling from one place to another gives enough scope for the imagination to work upon the notions of

nationalism. Ghosh creates a world where three countries – Bangladesh, India and England get interlocked and the people of one nation spill over another. Even if these lines signify a false façade, the narrator proclaims, "I believed in the reality of space; I believed in the reality of nations and borders; I believed that across the border there existed another reality" (Ghosh 66).

The narrator is shown as an overpowering character who is circumscribed in childhood memories. His childish demeanour tries to comprehend the multiple layers of nationalism on various dimensions. The depth of history is always reflected in the unnamed narrator's present psyche. While memory is assessed through several characters' communication with others, a vivid sense of alienation looms large in the character portrayals of the novel. The way the narrator reminisces the past brings much impetus to the texture of the novel. The geographical and temporal dislocations bring about a required change in the post-colonial circumstances. The immigrants' deep sense of attachment to their past is the obvious outcome of the new cultural paradigm that denoted their rootlessness. The memories aid in healing the nostalgic complexity. Being unable to merge into the new cultural milieu, the characters often indulge in their nationalistic traits. Forced migration or voluntary migration yields dislocation that exists as shadow lines, obliterated by memory, yearning and nostalgia. Urbashi Barat opines:

The Shadow Lines is of course one that quite obviously conforms to the bildungsroman pattern of beginning in the childhood of the narrator-protagonist and ending in his attaining adulthood and maturity. Each stage of his development is clearly demarcated through the change of location demanded of the bildungsroman. (Barat 21)

It is worth analysing the fact that maps and cartography play a decisive role in understating the fragmented identity crisis. The imaginary shadow lines cause displacement among the immigrants. The colonisers use the map in order to exercise their power of supremacy over the colonized. Said's observation is pertinent when he says, "imperialism is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted and finally brought under control" (Said 14). Ghosh articulates how the borders portray the coloniser-colonised equation. The incidents in the novel underscore that the borderlines are mere shadows which are fictitious. It serves as a critique of classical anthropology. Nationalism is seen as "that indivisible sanity that binds people to each other independently of their governments" (Ghosh 231). The narrator attempts to measure the distance of the different locales in the novel which portrays the fact that reality is something different from the atlas. In Ghosh's words:

They had drawn their borders, believing in that pattern, in the enchantment of lines, hoping perhaps that once they had etched their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of the prehistoric Gondwanaland. What had they felt, I wondered, when they discovered 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. (Ghosh, 233-4)

Despite differences in age, timeframe and background, the narrator, Tridib and Grandmother are weaved together in the thread of innate Indianness which Ila lacks at large. Benedict Anderson's observation is right when he opines about the nation which is an imagined political community. Grandmother embodies a legitimate perspective that works to evaluate

the opinions of other people. Her sense of nationalism is so strong that she is ready to forget the bitterness that happened years ago with her uncle. She utters:

It doesn't matter whether we recognize each other or not. We are the same flesh, the same blood, the same bone and now at last, after all these years, perhaps we'll be able to make amends for all that bitterness and hatred. (Ghosh 129)

It can be concluded that nationalist ideologies can unite or divide based on the mindset of the individuals. The novel traces how the people are affected by the political and social unrest; focusing on the historical events that resonate across generations. Though poignant, *The Shadow Lines* offers a thorough study of memory, imagination, nation and nationalism. Its appalling effects of partition never fail to captivate the minds of the readers which ultimately challenges our understanding of the world around us. The novel notes the problem of diaspora that delineates the discomfort of division amongst nations. Despite our negligence of the shadow lines, these lines distance the natives from their soil and bring psychological suffering to the diasporic souls. *The Shadow Lines* shows that the notion of freedom is a mirage; making the lives of the characters more vulnerable. Tha'amma is portrayed as a more realistic character than others, thus it is seen how she conjures up the fortitude to live upon the experiences of the past. In other words, this novel can be termed as a memory novel because the whole narrative is written from recollection. It presents non-chronological events that transcend traditional boundaries. All the historical events come together in this compelling saga to create the narrative structure. The narrator, being unnamed, highlights individual identity through collective consciousness. The unique synthesis of time and space marks the right rhythmic movement back and forth in time. The three different locales i.e., London, Calcutta and Dhaka have been used with deft precision.

The similarity of events in different places emphasizes the interconnectedness. The novel challenges the notion of a fixed unified nation and underscores the arbitrary nature of nation and nationhood. The impact of historical events on personal lives has been explored with due emphasis on cultural and political boundaries. In this way, Ghosh critiques the ideology of nationalism and shows how nationalism is intertwined in fragmented forms. The wonderful amalgamation of personal and historical narratives is conducive to an understanding of national identity in the face of political turmoil. The novel depicts not only the tale of the grandmother or meshomoshai; but is an unrelenting saga of a common man who is forced to drift away due to displacement. Ghosh vociferously condemns the rational and cultural prejudices and raises concern for cultural ties to exist. Ghosh's narrative insinuates the fact that partition is to be held responsible for the fragmented nationalism. The novel does not conclude but ends. Partition is not wanted in the socio-political structure, yet it makes life miserable and intolerable as well. The impact of partition is so enormous that people try to wreak each other and distort political judgements. Cultural heritage is destroyed by the inevitable outcome of partition. People become anonymous to each other as a result of partition.

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