
CLASS CONFLICTS AND CONSCIOUSNESS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S THE SHADOW LINES

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Abstract: Through his post-modernist novel *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh presents a critique of the nation-state construct, claiming that boundaries drawn between nations divide but cannot separate people. The novel takes the stand that political boundaries are arbitrary, and identity is constructed through one's 'invention' of the world rather than political markers. This paper undertakes a detailed textual analysis of Ghosh's novel in the light of Raymond Williams' book *Marxism and Literature* to examine the class prejudices that underlie the novel's central principle. The main argument of this paper is that the resolution of *The Shadow Lines* glorifies a global cosmopolitanism only available to a select few, and does not take into account those who do not have this choice. Its ideological perspective is therefore steeped within an elitism which reflects the class position of its major characters, most of which belong to this upper-class milieu. There are very few characters belonging to the lower-classes in the text, and the novel never really gives them a voice to relate their reality. Though the novel consciously steers clear of taking up a strong political stand, the ideologies voiced in the novel through the main characters show a very privileged view of issues which the novel deals with. The dispensability of boundaries celebrated in the novel is not the rule, but a privileged exception.

Keywords: About four key words or phrases in alphabetical order, separated by commas.

"...writing, like other practices, is in an important sense always aligned; that is to say, that it variously expresses, explicitly or implicitly, specifically selected experience from a specific point of view."

Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (198) Williams, in his book *Marxism and Literature*, claims that a literary work is never independent of the social and political conditions of its time but is always aligned towards the ideologies of a certain social group. Literature, according to Williams, is

"Not merely a medium, but is a constitutive element of material social practice" (Williams, 165)

Therefore the views espoused by any literary text are not universal, but are reflective of a particular social class. The focus of my paper is analysing Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* in the light of William's comments, focusing on Ghosh's portrayal of the main characters, as well as the various important politico-historic events that are presented in the novel to argue that the novel's central argument- that of rejection of fixed boundaries and identities- is not a universal phenomenon but an upper-class perspective. A post-modernist novel, *The Shadow Lines* explores the arbitrariness of political barriers and their implications on the lives of millions. It presents not just a critique, but a complete rejection of national boundaries. National borders, it claims are unreal, 'shadow' lines which divide people but cannot separate them. Through a novel which spans across four decades and two continents, Ghosh presents his views on national identities and history. The text refutes the existence of any concrete divide between countries, as well as between past and present. Cultural identities and time-lines overlap, emphasizing Ghosh's main

theoretical point- that people are the same everywhere. Ghosh presents such homogeneity as a universal truth which cuts across nations, eras and cultures. Such a political stand is nevertheless limited as it does not account for a large section of society for whom socio-political boundaries become deterministic. A.N. Kaul, in his essay "A Reading of *The Shadow Lines*", critiques such a generalization as a

"Bitter, mocking truth to the millions whose lives are riven by the oppression of divisive forces as racism, imperialism and class-exploitation" (Kaul, 301)

The dispensability of boundaries celebrated in the novel can only be attained through a global cosmopolitanism only accessible to a privileged minority and does not take into account the multitudes whose lives are irrevocably changed by political realities. *The Shadow Lines* traces events in the life of an unnamed narrator, beginning before his birth, interspersing his own experiences with that of his family members. The novel is thus firmly set within a certain social milieu. Significantly, all the major characters of the novel belong to the urban upper-middle class, and their ideologies are shaped by their social position. Meenakshi Mukherjee, in her essay "Maps and Mirrors", says that

"despite his anonymity, the narrator of *The Shadow Lines* is a firmly placed character. The precise class location of his family, the Bengali 'bhadralok'...is minutely recorded" (Mukherjee, 259)

The entire narrative unfolds through the eyes of the narrator, without any authorial intervention, therefore the dominant view that the novel presents is that of the narrator. The narrator's ideology can be seen as emerging from his own class position, as well

as from his close proximity to his upper-class relatives, the Dutta-Choudharys and their English friends, the Prices. The narrator's mentor and alter-ego, who shapes his ideas and his perception of things is his uncle Tridib, who is a typical upper-class intellectual. Tridib considers he a "man without a country". His ideas on politics and freedom are reflective of this. Tridib teaches the narrator that there are no nations, and one's identity is 'invented' through one's imagination: "that we could not see without inventing what we saw.... [And]....if we didn't try ourselves, we would never be free of other peoples' inventions" (Ghosh, 31). Freedom, for Tridib, thus means an escape from the constraints of a fixed identity, which reiterates the argument that political boundaries are illusory. Ila, the narrator's rich, cosmopolitan cousin, is another character who doesn't believe in nations and nationalities. A 'privileged globe-trotter', Ila has grown up in different parts of the world and does not see herself as having an 'Indian' identity. Her contempt for the "petit-bourgeois nastiness" of Indian culture and her desire to be a part of English society can be seen as an outcome of her education and economic status. Her outspokenness and sexual expressiveness can also be attributed to the fact that she is an extremely rich woman who does not live within the patriarchal framework. Ila's lifestyle, even the clothes she wears would not be available to a woman of a lower-class. Ila's idea of freedom- an escape from the stranglehold of 'Indian-values'-is also very privileged; "a freedom which can be bought at the price of an air-ticket" (Ghosh, 89). Through major characters like Tridib, Ila and the narrator, *The Shadow Lines* shows that political boundaries are merely political constructs and cannot separate people. The novel furthers this stand through the close inter-cultural relationship between the narrator's family and the Prices. But what the text does not say is that such a trans-cultural lifestyle is only possible for the upper-classes. Kaul critiques the alternative that *The Shadow Lines* provides as a limited view. "Shadow Lines", Kaul says, is a metaphor for evading rather than exploring political realities" (Kaul, 303) Nations do not disappear by claiming they do not exist. The novel critiques the idea of nations and shows that nation-states are invented through political discourse by drawing of arbitrary boundaries to divide people. But the novel does not confront the capitalistic forces that go into the making of a nation. What the novel presents, is not an alternative, but an escape-route which is not available to the lower-classes who are exploited by these forces. Another major character whose experiences shape the narrative is Thamma, the matriarch of the narrator's nuclear family. Thamma's views are also shaped by her own socio-

historic position, which is deeply entrenched within the middle-class. Thamma's experience of growing up in Calcutta during the time of nationalist terrorism instills in her a violent patriotism, and an unquestioning belief in the finality of borders- "nations draw their borders with blood" she claims, and "once that happens, people forget whether they were born Hindu or Muslim, Bengali or Punjabi (Ghosh, 78). Thamma's sense of freedom is limited to the political realm, to her identity as an Indian citizen. It is this identity of Thamma that the novel puts to question. After partition, Thamma's birthplace Dhaka, and her country become separate entities, between which her nationalistic vocabulary only comprehends the relationship of friendship or war. Thamma's dilemma arises when she decides to go back to Dhaka to get her uncle out of their ancestral house and bring him 'home'. Other characters cannot understand her confusion and make fun of her apprehensions. Her convictions are shown to fail when the riots break out in Dhaka. Mukherjee calls Thamma a "representative of her generation and class. The failure of her faith is thus the tragedy of an entire class" (Mukherjee, 265). The novel's dismissal of her beliefs can be interpreted as a rejection of the views of this bourgeois perspective. The political ideologies of the major characters, a product of their social positions, are fundamentally limited. There is no real engagement with social issues on the part of any of the characters. For instance, Ila's activism is of a superficial kind, stemming purely from her desire to experience the thrill of being a part of history, which for her, is limited to Europe's experience. She does not consider the history of the subcontinent of any importance, betraying an imperial snobbery in her. It is evident that Ila plays a marginal role in the political activities of the people she stays with, and is merely a decorative object, their "own upper-class Asian Marxist". She takes part in radical plays, and even takes up a job for a children's organization, openly admitting that she doesn't have any real interest in the cause. Thamma's violently nationalistic political ideology is similarly limited. Her desire to be part of the nationalist terrorist organizations was merely a jingoistic fantasy. Even May, whose humanitarian politics is much more effective than the others, lacks any clear agenda. She has an altruistic view of politics, without having a specific political leaning. The narrator's own political understanding is limited and inactive. Rajeswari Sundar-Rajan, in her essay "The Division of Experience in *The Shadow Lines*" attributes political passivity to male characters in the novel, saying that both the narrator and Tridib are "primarily observers of events rather than participants...neither of them seem to be a part of the

underground Naxalite movement in Calcutta in the sixties and seventies in which many young intellectuals like them were active” (Sunder-Rajan, 291). Tridib’s political inertia can be seen in many instances- his periodic haunts at the local tea-stalls near the narrator’s childhood residence were purely for his entertainment and not a political act. The narrator too, is politically inactive. Talking about the Naxalite movement, he establishes his role as that of an observer- “I had known people of my own age, who had survived the great terror....and I could say that I had at least a spectator’s knowledge of their courage” (Ghosh, 105). The political view that the novel takes is the one espoused by Tridib and the narrator- of ‘invention’ of a new identity rather than a change of the existing socio-political conditions. That *The Shadow Lines* privileges the point of view of the upper-classes can be seen through its portrayal of persons belonging to the lower-classes. In a narrative filled with multiple voices, there is not a single spokesperson of the lower-classes, and characters like Lizzie, Nityananda occupy a peripheral space. The novel touches on issues like the partition and the condition of refugees, but characters like Saifuddin, Khalil and the narrator’s poor refugee relative- the actual victims of the political reality- are pushed to the margins. For instance, even though the acute poverty in which the narrator’s relative stays is shown, both the narrator, as well as the narrative shy away from dwelling on it, “well schooled in the art of looking away, the jungle-craft of gentility”(Ghosh, 134). Instead, these events are shown through the perspective of people who are sheltered because of their privileged economic position. This is the most problematic aspect of Ghosh’s novel: it disregards material realities of the marginalized and universalizes the experiences of its own characters. The novel also foregrounds an upper-class view of history. Set mainly in Calcutta, London and Dhaka, the novel describes many historic events which concerned the narrator and his family. The novel privileges a subaltern view of history, presenting historic events like the Second World War, partition of India and outbreak of riots not through official accounts but through experiences of the characters. Ajanta Sircar, in her essay “Individualising History: The ‘real’ self in *The Shadow Lines*”, says that “‘freedom’ [in *The Shadow Lines*] involves a total negation of the historical past” (Sircar, 42). Throughout the novel, Tridib and the narrator reduce history to an imaginative construct. Tridib wants to meet May “in a place without a past, without history, free, really free...” (Ghosh, 144) Such de-historification is politically reductive, as the official narrative cannot change through a simplistic negation of its existence. Events like riots cannot be

seen in vacuum: the socio-political issues leading to them need to be acknowledged. It is significant that the experiences of the ‘common people’ that the novel presents belong to the upper-classes, and are not affected by them. Tridib’s accounts of his experience of the World War, betrays a detached, secure perspective. Mayadebi calls the Second World War, a time of international violence and crises, “England’s most glorious hour” (Ghosh, 66). Important political movements like Nazism, Trotskyism and the Nazi-Soviet pact are casually mentioned in the narrative without considering the implications they had on the lives of those involved. The issue of India’s partition too, is presented through this position of privilege: Thamma the only character really affected by the partition is ridiculed. The other characters make fun of her confusion when she is told that there would be no visible border between India and East-Pakistan. Her question- “what was it all for then- the partition and all those killings, if there isn’t anything in between?” (Ghosh, 151) can be construed as a critique of the violence that the partition ensued, but by deriding her position the novel takes a very detached view of the event. The outbreak of riots and their adverse effects on the narrator’s family are also presented through the narrator’s position of privilege: the riots occupy an in-absentia presence - characterized by an impenetrable silence. The narrator accepts that it is his middle-class sensibility that cannot comprehend the irrationality of mob violence, the antithesis of the state’s organized power-structure- “there was no room in it for this ‘other thing’” (Ghosh, 219) -and such violence is therefore not allowed articulation. The novel interrogates the reality of spaces and boundaries through events like the riots and the ‘upside-down house’, but presents material realities as being inferior to the power of invention. Kaul claims that though the novel “never loses sight of political realities, its trajectory points the other way....offering a private refuge from a world with whose historical and political realities it either cannot or does not wish to cope” (Kaul, 309). A refuge only available to the class of people that the novel represents, who are privileged enough to remain unaffected by material realities. The novel foregrounds individual rather than collective experience, having at its centre the upper-class subject. The ending exemplifies this point. The mystery of Tridib’s death is finally unraveled by the narrator. But though Tridib was killed by a mob, his death is not a political act but an individual choice. The narrative glorifies Tridib’s death, exalting it as a ‘sacrifice’. Sircar calls this the “critical limitation” of the novel- “the narrator suggests that Tridib’s perspective can challenge dominant stereotypes by

imaginative reconstruction of time and place and thus enables one to historicize context...not realizing that the process of elaborating a new identity involves social action rather than being merely a product of an individual choice made autonomously of society" (Sircar, 39). Moreover, Tridib's death shows that national boundaries do shape reality and cannot be disregarded as 'shadows'. Incidents like the riots and Ila's experience of racism show that boundaries of nations, space and time cannot be

wished away, but have to be negotiated with at a social and political level. Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* questions fixities of nations and borders, presenting these as arbitrary. But its representation of the main characters, as well as the many historic events it presents, shows that this dispensability of boundaries is only available to the upper-classes. The novel's perspective is thus a very privileged one and this becomes one of the most significant limitations of the novel's vision.

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