
**TREATMENT OF NATIONALITY, INTERNATIONALITY AND CULTURAL HISTORICAL
SELF DETERMINATION IN AMITAV GHOSH'S
*THE SHADOW LINES***

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Abstract: Writing in postcolonial India, Amitav Ghosh realizes that politics and literature cannot be kept separated. His second novel *The Shadow Lines* is obviously a critique of nationalism. Here he celebrates the existence of a mental bond between the people of different nations which cuts across geographically and politically defined boundaries. The novel is set against the backdrop of historical events like the riots in Dhaka in the early twenties, struggle for independence, Partition and the post Partition dismembering of lives and families.

Through different historical events Ghosh critiques the geographically and politically drawn boundaries across the nations. To him, 'the shadow lines' are not only the lines between different nations but they are also the lines between illusion and reality, between fact and fiction, between past and present, between coloniser and colonised. All these lines are blurred and fading. He upholds Homi K Bhabha's concept of 'Nation as narration'. Bhabha says that it is in the people's imagination that makes a nation come into being. The characters like the narrator and Ila, the narrator and Nick, Tha'mma and Ila etc. mirror one another, as do their experiences and incidents, cities and neighborhoods, as if to suggest that the lines that separate their lines of identity- are only shadows.

Amitav Ghosh is a man of strong sense of history. His view of humanity and his thematic engagement with the fluidity of identity are examples of his postcolonial concerns. Through *The Shadow Lines*, he has succeeded in presenting the truth that human society cannot be divided by shadow lines of nations, colour and race. Indians and British people, Hindus and Muslims are shown to have the same basic emotions and instincts.

Key words: Boundaries, nationalism, partition, postcolonial.

Introduction: "The characters in Ghosh's novel don't occupy discrete cultures, but 'dwell in travel' in cultural spaces that flow across borders – the shadow lines drawn around modern nation states":- Robert Dixon

Writing in postcolonial India, Ghosh realizes that politics and literature cannot be kept separated. His second novel *The Shadow Lines* is a critique of nationalism. Here he celebrates the existence of a mental bond between the people of different nations which cuts across geographically and politically defined boundaries. The novel is set against the backdrop of historical events like the riots in Dhaka in the early twenties, struggle for independence, Partition and the post Partition dismembering of lives and families.

Though the geographical boundaries are drawn across the subcontinent dividing the country into India and Pakistan and later partition of Pakistan itself into Bangladesh and Pakistan, the novelist draws attention to the fact that human lives on either side of the border remain connected to each other. The people of the divided country share common experiences.

Bangladesh was carved out of Bengal, but this man-made division has not affected the cultural unity of the people. Bengalis are Bengalis in both the countries. Even regions cannot restrain people from

being united, since love doesn't admit of any obstacles. When Mu-i-Mubarak was brought to Kashmir and installed at the picturesque Hazratbal mosque, Kashmiris of all faiths and religions, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists marched in thousands from every part of Kashmir to get a glimpse of the relic. They would flock to Hazratbal on the occasion when the relic was displayed to the public. When the relic disappeared, all of them were equally appalled and they enjoyed when it was recovered.

Though Jethamoshai was a Hindu fanatic in the early part of his life, he gave shelter to Muslim families in his own house when problems arise following partition. Similarly, in Calcutta too, many Muslim families gave shelter to Hindu refugees. All these show there is a brotherhood which dwells naturally in the hearts of human beings all over the world. But the governments of Pakistan and India blame each other for riots of 1964 in Dhaka and Calcutta. It proves the perverted view of nationalism and patriotism creates frissures in human society.

When Tha'mma looks down from the plane as she passes from India to Pakistan in 1964 to bring Jethamoshai to Calcutta, she is surprised to see no visible border on the ground. She says: "If there is no difference, both sides will be the same; it will be just like it used to be before." [164] But her elderly relative

refused to go to Calcutta. 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?"[202]

The characters like the narrator and Ila, the narrator and Nick, Tha'mma and Ila etc. mirror one another, as do their experiences and incidents, cities and neighborhoods, as if to suggest that the lines that separate them- their lines of identity- are only shadows.

The novelist thinks that the communal riots are generally sporadic and they do not leave the psyche frayed because an undercurrent of brotherhood binds people of all faiths and religions. The novelist wants to say that the lines on a map do separate one country from the other, but these neighboring countries have the same culture which nobody can divide. The lines on the map are shadow lines in the sense that the divisions they create are illusory.

Through different historical events Ghosh critiques the geographically and politically drawn boundaries across the nations. To him, 'the shadow lines' are not only the lines between different nations but they are also the lines between illusion and reality, between fact and fiction, between past and present, between coloniser and colonized. All these lines are blurred and fading. He upholds Homi K Bhabha's concept of 'Nation as narration'. Bhabha says that it is in the people's imagination that makes a nation come into being.

The East-West encounter begins in the novel with the friendship between Mr. Lionel Tresawsen and Mr. Justice Chandrashekhar Datta Chaudhari, settled in Calcutta. Mr. Tresawsen attended séances conducted by a Russian medium. He met Mr. Dutta Chaudhari in one of these séances and struck friendship with him. Their friendship runs into three generations.

Ghosh's brilliant meditation on the theme of internationality is well brought out through some instances in the novel. Nick, the English man and Ila, the Indian girl tie the nuptial knot in spite of their different religions and nationalities. Tridib falls in love with May, though later he is killed, in a sense, because of her. The sexual union between the Indian narrator and the English woman May becomes a metonym for the possibility of making human connections across cultural differences. The commonality of the experiences of the people around the world is also brought out through the character of Lionel Tresawsen. He had been in Germany for many years and it was during the time of Second World War that he returned to England. He observes that the effect of war is same both in Germany and in England. It seemed to him like stepping through a mirror. The realities and problems faced by people all the world over are almost the same.

Tridib is the character who thinks across cultures rather than beyond them. To him, ultimate journey is the journey beyond the self. He tells the narrator that it is the real desire that matters, "that carried one beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and other places and even if one was lucky to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror." The narrator says, "Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see with."

Tha'mma, being an old timer, doesn't like Ila at all and she doesn't want the narrator to have any connection with Ila. She calls her a whore. Tha'mma's concept of freedom conflicts with that of Ila. Tha'mma's ideologies and concepts are rigid and strict unlike Ila's. Since Ila is living in England, she is influenced by its culture and civilization. According to Tha'mma, "Ila has no right to live there. It took those people a long time to build that country.... They know they are a nation because they have drawn their dream with blood.... That's what it takes to make a country." Through these two characters the novelist establishes that it is not officially drawn geographical boundaries that define nationalism.

When Ila visits India and goes to the night club in Calcutta with Robi and the narrator, she offers to dance with a stranger on an invitation from him. But Robi prevents her from dancing with a stranger saying, "You can do what you like in England. But here there are certain things you cannot do. That's our culture, that's how we live." Actually Robi is not so rigid in his moral ideologies. But now he wants acceptance among his fellow men. This hypocrisy of Robi provokes Ila and she shouts that she lives in England because she wants to be freed of "bloody Indian culture". Robi cannot free himself of the natural baggage while Ila frowns upon it.

Conclusion:- Amitav Ghosh is a man of strong sense of history. His view of humanity and his thematic engagement with the fluidity of identity are examples of his postcolonial concerns. Through *The Shadow Lines*, he has succeeded in presenting the truth that human society cannot be divided by shadow lines of nations, colour and race. Indians and British people, Hindus and Muslims are shown to have the same basic emotions and instincts.

Darsana Trivedi, a critic, comments, "Let us share the feelings of Upnishads, 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam'. It implies that 'the whole world is our extended family'. Thus Amitav Ghosh excels as a postcolonial writer, in dealing with the themes like nationality, internationality and how history and culture play an important role in the self determination of human beings.

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