

AMITAV GHOSH'S *SHADOW LINES*: AN ENIGMA OF INDIAN FREEDOM STRUGGLE

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Amitav Ghosh stands out among his peers for his admirable prose as well as for his brilliant perception of the complexities in human relations in a multi-cultural world. *Shadow Lines* explores the author's major concern about wider, cross-border humanity with a striking insight into the issues of ethnic nationalism and communalism. It is also an attempt to give voice to the stony silences and exhume the unclaimed corpses in the catacombs of "unhistorical historiography". It interrogates the political consciousness baptized in the crucible of national divide. The focus is actually a fact of history - the partition and the post-partition scenario of violence. It is principally organized through weaving together of personal lives and public events. The finished form ultimately excavates personal and social history vis-a-vis the racial riots in some parts of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and mainly, Calcutta in India.

The novel was also the result of turmoil created by Indira Gandhi's assassination and the anti-sikh riots of 84 in Delhi. Rather, it is a continuous narrative, which replicates the pattern of violence experienced in the 11th September incident of America. Against such a violent scenario and in the context of cross-cultural interaction, the author seems to express his own views through Tridib. A cousin of the narrator's father, Tridib has witnessed the gruesome partition of India and the corollary creation of Pakistan in 1947. He therefore, hankers after a place "where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror" (32). The image in the mirror is a poignant reference to that segment of population that has either fled or been made to flee to the newly created nation-state of Pakistan.

Earlier Partition novels such as Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* and Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* had dealt with the physical horrors of partition. Now with that experience at least partially digested, it became possible to look in the rear view mirror and consider the longer term consequences, both communal and personal, that followed in the wake of partition and these often involved traumas that were as much psychic as physical. While the title most obviously suggests the arbitrary cartographic borders that divide people who have as many commonalities as difference in their cultures, shadow lines are also the lines of demarcation that separate present and past, self and image, colonizer and colonized. The novel journeys across the borders promoting a humanist vision of relationships with a fluency that makes its moments of horror viscerally shocking, far more so than the grand guignol violence of many classic tragedies.

This paper is therefore an attempt to reveal the deleterious effects of political partitioning and colonial power hegemonies on the people of both the nations. How the protagonist keeps insisting on transcending political pressures in favour of a broader based humanist vision of both national and global relationships. *Shadow Lines* is perhaps the first Indian novel in English where in the memories of Bengal's cleavage are psychologically explored and given a unique spin in the narrative by interrogating the arbitrariness of cartographic determinations.

A narrative of three generations - the narrator's Bengali family in pre-partition Dhaka and Calcutta, and their English friends - the Prices whose histories encompass both world wars, the left Book Club and shades of contemporary London, *Shadow Lines* does not tell yet one more tale of the Raj but sets out to illuminate the absurdities of borders and frontiers, the lines of disillusion and tragedy that intersect with private lines and public events. As the British Empire collapsed and lines were drawn up dividing the Indian-subcontinent, thousands were exiled. The story of 1947 became a narrative of displacement and dispossession, of large-scale and wide-spread communal violence. People were forced to accommodate the dramatically altered reality. The concept and meaning of freedom has been explored from different perspectives in the novel.

Political freedom was a momentous event that happened in 1947. Equality and freedom were granted to all the citizens of the country. Once this freedom was legally granted to them, it became evident that while it was easy to enact laws, it was very difficult to actually experience this freedom because of the complex and contradictory forces inherent in the Indian society. These forces are difficult to restrain as they have introduced the divisive tendencies that tear the country apart. What is freedom for one may mean enslavement for the other. The meaning of Freedom is different for different characters in the novel, depending on their experiences.

The opening section *Going Away* begins with Ghosh introducing his characters. On one hand, is the narrator's family - his grandmother, his parents and on the other are his grandmother's sister - Mayadebi, her diplomat husband, and her three sons: Jatin, an economist with the UN; Tridib, the narrator's uncle and mentor; Robi and her grand-daughter Ila (Jatin's child) who is always away with her parents. The narrator's grandmother is a product of a bygone era. She has within herself an unflinching faith in the sanctity of political freedom and she is an example of moulded character of historical forces and an understanding of the present.

Chronologically, the narration begins in 1939 when there was outbreak of the Second world war and India was passing through a colonial rule. The stretch of history during these years as well as from 1962 to 1979 is the effective background of *Shadow Lines*, against which Ghosh evokes postcolonial situation, cultural dislocations and anxieties and interprets the issue of fractured nationalities in close and telling encounters. He effectively delineates the psychological built up of characters who have moved from pre-partition to post-partition India and also those who are borne in post-partition society. Although they live in a free world, but enmeshed in whims and fantasies of their own.

The novel is a fine revelation of how these people are victims of identity crisis. Older generation like Thamma who are unable to reconcile with the new and the changing scenario and the younger generation suffering from the problem of rootlessness. Thamma, the narrator's grandmother, born and brought up in Dhaka has to accept the grim reality that after 1947, Dhaka is no longer her home. She might have well asked, "who am I? Am I an Indian merely because I am a Hindu and live in Calcutta?" Given a choice, she would rather have stayed on in Dhaka. Dhaka would remain a home only in her memory, a home that she could not go to. She keeps on wavering between Dhaka and Calcutta that are like two opposite poles trying to redefine her identity.

The psychological implications of partition are different for different characters. Freedom means different to them depending on the stage they occupy in the backdrop of recent Indian history. Thamma had been a young girl in Dhaka when the freedom struggle had reached its peak. Later she had witnessed the birth of two new nations, experienced the pain associated with the partition of the country and

participated in the new order and the new political system that evolved out of the trauma of partition. To Ila, two generations later, the spirit of freedom that inspired Thamma is a thing of the past. She is a post-partition child. She is unable to conform or adapt to the society in India and escapes to another world with a different set of values, a different social system. For each one of them, namely Thamma and Ila, the concept of freedom has been moulded by their own individual experience and different worlds they inhabit. The narrator who is rooted in Calcutta, his imaginative universe knows no boundaries. He is transported by Tridib's stories, and by Ila's, to places which come alive for him with a powerful immediacy. For the narrator, Tridib who insists on a precision of observation and recollection, is the author of this immediacy.

Thamma is a stern nationalist and therefore, she becomes the object of novelist's satire in the story. She worships war and it is her religion. Considering the example of the English people, she believes that they were able to rule the world only as they were ardent nationalists:

Hasn't Maya told you how regimental flags hang in all their cathedrals and how all their churches are lined with memorials to men who died in wars all around the world? . . . That's what it takes to make a country. . . (85, 86)

It is through the narrator's grandmother that Ghosh disembowels the funeral pyre of the people of England for their nation lamenting for the same in his own country. But this was not the case with Ila. She says that she wants to be free. "Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you" (98). It was not that easy as the novelist voices through the narrator, "I am within you, just as you are within me" (98). The narrator ponders over the fact that how the concept of being free has changed since independence, "that grandmother would have nothing but contempt for a freedom that could be bought for the price of an air ticket" (98).

Followed by division of our country into India and Pakistan, the entire world witnessed killing, rape, arson, murder, loot. There was so much of bloodshed and murder on both the sides. Thamma herself witnesses this trauma later on in the novel. Thamma is the sufferer in the event of partition and Ila, a mere spectator who can only listen to the entire narrative of partition disinterestedly from a distance. Thamma is proud of her Indianess. Ila detests her Indian identity and is proud of being a part of English world.

The strength and limitations of both the cultures are seen through Ila. India will not confer upon Ila the freedom she needs. India may be conservative and restraining but there is final security in institutions like marriage, where as England though provides freedom it also incorporates the evils of racism and the break-down of social institutions. Ila feels happy to be a part of history in London where as her ignorance of India's troubles does not deter her in the least. She is simply happy because her stay in London would make her a part of British history. Her narrow outlook towards her own country is looked down upon by the novelist with contempt and disgust.

Ila is quite confident of her role she plays in anti-Nazi movement in London: "You can't know what this kind of happiness means . . . there's a joy merely in knowing that you are a part of history". Her restricted views on Indian society and culture reflects nothing but her shortsightedness: "Nothing really important ever happens where you are. Well of course there are famines and riots and disasters. But these are local things after all. . . ." However, the narrator is proud of being an Indian as he later confides:

. . . I knew nothing at all about England except as an invention. But still I had known people of my own age, who had survived the great terror in the Calcutta of

the sixties and seventies, and I thought I had at least a spectator's knowledge of their courage, something that Ila with her fine clothes, manicured hands, would never understand. (115-116)

The story now moves from the days of partition to the year 1962. Politically, the year was important as it was the year of Indo-China war. In the family of narrator, it was important as they shifted to their new house in Southern Avenue opposite the lake in Calcutta. Thamma still had nostalgic feelings for Dhaka, her birth place, as well as for the house where she spent a major part of her life. There were many people who used to live in that big house. But later on misunderstandings created lines of demarcation.

Meenakshi Mukherjee in her book - *Maps & Mirrors* co-relates division of the house with the division of the country:

The house metaphor, for example, is worked out relentlessly by tying it up with the division of Bengal. The grandmother's expectation of the visibility of border between India and East Pakistan grew indirectly out of her experience of the territorial division she had witnessed in her childhood. (Mukherjee 264)

In other words, when studied comprehensively, the cleavage of the house symbolizes the cleavage of the country itself. As a child, Thamma always wanted to cross the wall so as to solve the hidden mystery behind the veil but she couldn't, due to bitterness on both the sides. It was years later that she got an opportunity and embraced it whole-heartedly. When the narrator and his family shifted to their new house, she met in one such meeting at the park Minadi, her neighbour in Dhaka from whom she collected information about her uncle Jethamoshai's son who was living in Calcutta. Her happiness knew no bounds. She wanted to grab this golden opportunity. Thamma justified her eagerness to meet her cousin:

She frowned . . . That's not important, she snapped. It doesn't matter whether we recognize each other or not. We're 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. (142)

Claire Chambers in his critical work - *Riots, Rumours, and Relics: Amitav Ghosh's Shadow Lines* states:

Partition unleashed all kinds of psychological anguish. People felt let down by their leaders for allowing such a cataclysm to occur with so little demurral. They felt betrayed by a newly created religious enemy, people with whom they had lived for so long and of whose sadistic violence they now heard such lurid accounts. Perhaps the most bewildering and traumatic aspect of their suffering was the loss of their birth place and the cruel dismembering of their cognitive maps. (Chambers 41)

However, it was very difficult to make Thamma understand efficacy of borders. A woman like her cannot understand politics of partition. It is through her that the novelist makes a scathing attack on the futility of borders:

But surely there's something trenches perhaps, or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land. Don't they call it no man's land? If

there are not any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference then? (167)

The grandmother's expectation of the visibility of the border between Indian and East Pakistan grew indirectly out of her experience of the territorial division she had witnessed in childhood. Yet, despite her insistence on the tidiness of separation we find her disregarding the imperatives of the division when she goes through a great deal of planning and danger to rescue a relative who belonged to the wrong side of the house. "It is a mirage. How can anyone divide a memory?" (272)

On her arrival at Dhaka, she fails to recognize the city of the childhood as the narrator puts it. Her first question to Mayadebi at the airport was - "Where's Dhaka? I can't see Dhaka. Her Dhaka had long since vanished into the past" (213). And Tridib could not resist the malicious pleasure of pointing out - "But you are a foreigner now, you're as foreign here as May . . . she does not even need a visa to come here" (215).

Simultaneously, trouble cropped up in Calcutta also. There were rumours that someone had poured poison in Tala Tank, and that whole of Calcutta's water supply had been poisoned. The streets had turned themselves inside out. Each one of the narrator's friends suspected the hands of Muslims in this. The boy's fear of their city is described as:

We were stupefied with fear. That particular fear has a texture you can neither forget nor describe. It is like the fear of the victims of an earth quake, of people who have lost faith in the stillness of the earth . . . (225)

As the ill luck would have it, they finally decide to leave Dhaka when the entire city was riot strewn. "There were dozens of them all in way across the road. Robi, narrator's uncle could tell from the way they were watching the road that trouble had come to him at last" (240). While Khalil was bringing Jethamoshai in his rickshaw, the rioters attacked them. Tridib came to their rescue, but all three were mercilessly butchered by the crowd. Tridib's personal sacrifice demonstrates that the individual efforts are doomed to failure in the face of gripping critical events like riots.

Ghosh reveals a sense of history and a firm grasp of socio-cultural and historical material when he catches alive the trauma of emotional rupture through the emotional baggage of the freedom movement in Bengal, the partition of India and measure of communal hatred breaking out into riots in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) following the Hazratbal incident in Srinagar in 1964:

Although the Sacred Relic - the sacred hair of Prophet Mohammad was reinstalled and the city of Srinagar erupted with joy, there was only one small rumble of warning. In Khulna, a small town in the distant east wing of Pakistan, a demonstration that was marching in protest against the theft of the relic turned violent. (249,250)

This incident paved the way to the frenzy of looting, killing and burning. In Calcutta, being a border state, rumours were in the air that trains from Pakistan were arriving packed with corpses. Mobs went rampaging through the city, killing Muslims, and burning and looting their shops and houses. There are no reliable estimates of how many people were brutally murdered in the riots of 1964. The number could stretch from several hundred to several thousand; at any rate not less than were killed in the war of 1962. It was quite easy for the government of both the nations to forget this incident: "By the end of January 1964, the memory of the riots vanished into the usual cloud of rhetorical exchanges" (250).

Ghosh identifies the tight bonds between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh when he writes:

Indian and Pakistani politicians had drawn their borders, believing in the pattern that the two bits of land would sail away like shifting tectonic plates of prehistoric Gondwanaland. . . . simple fact is that there had never been a moment in the four thousand 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, . . . (257)

But Tridib's death at the hands of the rioting mob in Dhaka changes Thamma's attitude towards the place of her birth, i.e. Dhaka. Her nostalgic longing for her city of origin now gives way to a sense of hatred. "Kill everyone of them" is what she says listening to the news about the Indo-Pakistan war on the radio (261).

Nyla Ali Khan in her critical work - *Citizenship In A Transnational Age: Culture And Politics In Ghosh's The Shadow Lines* emphatically states:

The political and the social upheaval that followed upon the creation of the nation-state of India and Pakistan in 1947 had left legacies that continue to haunt the two countries. The partition enabled the thunderous forces of violence and displacement to tear the pre-existing cultural and social fabric so systematically that the process of repair hasn't even begun. (Khan103)

In fact, the political freedom won by the nation had created grounds for animosity and hatred by drawing up superfluous lines, demarcatory nations and boundaries. Thamma's understanding of true freedom is incomplete. Her disenchantment with freedom is complete when she realizes that her sacrifice had been invain. By placing the grandmother at the centre, the novelist attempts to lend authenticity to his perception since she like mini-Tiresias has been witness to the entire holocaust.

Creeds, communities, east-west, colonizers and the colonized, past-present, these have been our shadow-lines which are geographically unreal but culturally and politically cutting the globe into many parts bleeding in conflict. An effective fiction, it emanates from a particular historical moment which intersects the narrator and the nation at a crucial point of their evolution and growth. It quickens our conscience and triggers our response to the mingled frenzy of violence, idealism, passion and intrigue that has amputated the narrator's intimate history and geography. The novel is a revelation of Ghosh's passionate search of strategies for survival in a violent, hate-filled world of narrow divisions. It is in love that he finds the ultimate solution. Tridib's relation with May Price is symbolic of an affinity that transcends all the shadow lines of national and cultural boundary when the two countries, India and England were bitterly pitted against each other. Only the narrator under the influence of his mentor, Tridib is able to perceive the futility of borders and boundaries.

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