



Diaspora and Nationhood in *The Shadow Lines*

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ABSTRACT: The novel *The Shadow Lines* has shown to the reader how the universe is not an easy location in an atlas, but how many unavoidable truths are in this strong line that leads to violent bloodshed of political aggression. From national feelings, the borders between nations are like shadow lines, hate and animosity. The notion of nationhood and diaspora is discussed by Amitav Ghosh. These proposals include links between people from the same or separate cultures, often transgressing and transcending the shadow lines of democratic boundaries. This paper sets out to contextualize Diaspora and Nationhood through a close reading of *The Shadow Lines*.

Key Words – Nationhood, Diaspora, national identity, contextual vacuum, loss of home

The area of the country in which you are born is generally a residence, a home country or a motherland. A government can maintain the interests of the country in the legislative framework, but where the State is unwilling to bear a human being's burden, his entire body is at risk. Amitav Ghosh writes an invaluable book, *The Shadow Lines*, at the heart of the crisis. This paper aims to contextualise the diaspora and nationhood by reading *The Shadow Lines* in near detail. Nationhood or nationalism may apply to a philosophy, a feeling, a community or a popular movement focusing on the country. *The Shadow Lines* are perhaps Ghosh's most confrontation with nationalism and national identification, and they simultaneously address the identity of each character. The notion of nationhood and diaspora is discussed by Amitav Ghosh. These proposals include links between people from the same or separate cultures, often transgressing and transcending the shadow lines of democratic boundaries.

The Shadow Lines is a novel which only deals with the aftermath of the Partition and the Partition on the Bengal border. It is necessary to remember that Ghosh is the only influential



Indian-English novelist who is concerned with the Bengal Party and the exile protests it has contributed to. *The Shadow Lines* takes up the task of reflecting the complexity of national identity, following on from its analysis of the logic of frontiers in the postcolonial sense. The shadow lines are the reflection of the novel as a symbol of those ties which, even as they separate, paradoxically bind nations and individuals. The mirror image in the novel emphasises that the narrators have a reciprocal relationship with the other characters that accompany it and with London, Dhaka and Calcutta. *The Shadow Lines* reflects on the Calcutta and Dhaka family of storytellers and their relation to the London English family. The bond between the grandmother of the narrator and her animosity for grandmother of her sister Ila embodies a struggle between nationalism and cosmopolitan migrant society, even though it renders the boundaries and shortcomings of these two middle class people apparent.

The Shadow Lines is an intense illustration of cross-border language, especially ethnicity, culture and language. The novel centres on nationalism, the shadow borders between individuals and nations that are both absurd and a source of terror. In an effort to disturb the condensed, smooth storey of national identification, *Shadow Lines* unveils confronted, frightening, hidden memories. The unidentified narrator of *The Shadow Lines* falls into touch with his key protagonists in the book, his grandma Tha'mma, his cousin Ila, and his uncle Tridib and Robi, with distinct, sometimes conflicting versions of the national and cultural identity. The narrator, growing up in a professional family of the middle classes in Calcutta, acquires the sensitivity of an urban, bi-lingual, anglophone and poscolonial subject. His interplay with his cousin and uncles, the fathers of whom are ambassadors from across the world, and his studies in London render his exposure to national and cultural topics more cosmopolitan. Yet his fiercely autonomous, militantly nationalist woman is one of his most influential forces on his life. Tha'mmas firm beliefs regarding ethnicity, faith, and belongings begin to get confused when, after a long period and for the first time after partition, she returns to her birthplace in Dhaka. She is startled that she can see little difference between India and Eastern Pakistan from the aircraft, as boundaries are crossed at airports in the western world as landing forms are filled out. The storyteller claims,



"My grandmother's eyes widened, and she slumped back in her chair... It had suddenly occurred to her that she would have to fill in 'Dhaka' as her place of birth on that form... and she couldn't even grasp at the time how her place of birth had been so messily contrary to her nationality " (TSL - 155).

Tha'mma's perplexity is a pragmatic in millions on the subcontinent, and the rhetoric of nationhood puts importance on the corporeality of space and distance and its trust in the infallibility of the shadow boundaries is an effort to contend with this circumstance of being "messily at odds." Her uncle is to authentically link religion and nationality to Tha'mma's ideology. He declines to be saved from Muslim East Pakistan to remain with his Hindu family in India.

"I don't believe in this India-Shindia," he says, "You're both really well, but suppose they try to draw another line somewhere before you get there... Here I was born and I'm going to die."(TSL - 216).

Ghosh imagines and constructs certain historical scenarios and sees what occurs when an individual becomes involved in historical events. History frequently tracks occurrence shifts and chronology. Literature does not need to chronologically chart the shifts, rather reflects those changes. Ghosh reflects developments at human and global and international levels. Thus, both micro and macro levels are part of his portrayal. He uses the time mirror to represent representations of time changes. Ghosh seems to indicate that the topic of gender was omitted by Indian nationalism, not included in its platform.

"How invisible the subjugation of women had been rendered in the ideology of liberal nationalism" (Tharu and Lalita 88).

The general trend of the nationalists was to think that compulsory suffrage would inevitably guarantee freedom and that the Congress Party never made any attempt to secure women's electoral seats until after independence. The Shadow Lines can be considered as a Bengali family tale on one level. The author analyses many of the topics under discussion in contemporary India. The plot deals cleverly with its major body characters covering three



decades. The history of these characters is not told in temporal vacuum; instead, it correlates in three decades or more to the development of Calcutta as a region, and of India as a country. In the shadow of events of enormous national importance, private activities in the life of the speaker and other critical characteristics arise significantly. Tha'mma, the grandma of the unknown narrator, is also here to address the Bengal Partition and the entire idea of country, nationalism and nationality.

Ghosh tries to criticise the shadow boundaries as a means of freedom and nationality. Ghosh refers to the restrictions of realisation of citizenship by his criticism of Tha'mma's version of nationalism and the naiveté of putting trust on national boundaries, as well as his disapproval of the prevalent philosophy of independence through Robi's speech of nationality. He articulates the need to conceptualise identification questions in broader cultural and historical communities. While fictitious, all his characters and incidents are built around certain details from the past or present. The characters and plots must be embedded in the solid ground of human existence experience for him. His writings penetrate many structures and systems of authority in culture and aim to understand the whole human life. Power forces have long dominated and governed the existence of a person. One curious aspect regarding the character organisation in romances is that every character is an entity and essential to the story's flow. He also weaves the plot in a way that breaks any order of priority. If Tridib is an excellent character in *The Shadow Lines*, then the position of the writer, Might and grandmother is equally crucial. Tridib, the quirky historian cousin who highlights the challenge of the theory of culture. Then there is the third generation Ila, the second cousin of the writer, who highlights the problems of diaspora and bigotry. The narrator's position is often central in that he articulates the ideas held by these characters in order to combine these subjective perspectives and memories so as to illustrate the incompleteness of both collective discourse, such as history, and personal discourse, such as anecdotes. The narrator's position is often vital to the narrative of the book, which is one of the stories told non-linearly throughout the plot.



Unlike Tha'mma's radical nationalist fervour and paranoia, Ghosh introduces the silent power and health of the uncle of the narrator, Robi. He is a straight, principal, religious man who has been influenced not by socio-political pressures, but is simultaneously Indian in his culture and principles. Born in the post-colonial period, Robi is a resident of sovereign and secular India and does not have to face up to the inherently broken sense of self like others who have been decolonised and divided. The needless brutality that destroys Robi's brother and renders him the target of mob rage is part of his post-colonial Indian identity. Robi articulates his formulation of liberty and nationhood after the incidence of Tridib's assassination,

"Free...You know, if you look at the pictures on the front pages of the newspapers...dead in Assam, the North-East, Punjab, Sri Lanka, Tripura—the terrorists and rebels who fired the military and the police... It's all done 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?" (TSL-247).

The Shadow Lines may be interpreted as destabilising the set and binary logic placed in the construction of nationalist frontiers on a country of otherness, culture, heritage and memory. In *The Shadow Lines*, thus, Ghosh portrays national identification in a manner that forces one to recognise the ambivalence of borders, even though we agree that partition was inevitable. The narrator wonders:

"...what had they felt I wondered when they discovered that they had created not a separation, but a yet undiscovered irony – the irony that killed Tridib: the simple facts 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 – so closely that I, in Calcutta had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free – ourlooking-glass border" (TSL- 233).

The novel recalls the manifestations of violence manifested by nationality and imperialism at home, domestic spaces and privacy to raise issues of sex, recollection, and



belonging to the public domain that South Asian nationalist history cannot address. One of the greatest forces on the writer, his grandmother Tha'mma, embodies the ideas and principles of the nationalistic revolution in India. The book blends public affairs and people's personal lives – especially families of the middle class. Besides the thematic occupation, Ghosh reflects on the topic of the Partition of India and its consequent dramatic consequences on people's minds and emotions. Ghosh plans to forge a country into two countries, one east and the other west. Such moves in order to draw a line through the country are not content with people who are not in the forefront of a wealthy community. It does not resolve or alleviate the suffering and anguish of displaced people.

Instead, the divided are faced with existential issues. Ghosh asked if the partition is a response to civil unrest issues on ethnic or political grounds. The Party causes a sense of shame and agony for precious and close people who are forced to leave home or place of their birth simply because of the whims of the political response to the nation's dilemma. Ghosh challenges the very foundation of democratic states. How many states remain in a continent or in a subcontinent doesn't matter. It does not change the people's well-being. Nationhood itself is a mirage since it is not logical. If nature draws a line like mountains, seas, rivers, it's right. However, human boundaries are superficial and unjustifiable.

Ghosh is certainly the writer of the Diaspora, who faces the condition of homelessness. However, home, which is essential for finding a sense of belonging, is not easy to find by expatriate writers after he left his homeland long ago. When these authors know they do not belong to the country in which they fled, they resolve to seek their original family, the "home" sense they believe can only be contained in their country. Although Ghosh's protagonists are globe-to-globe from one part of the country, springing from not just political and physical limits but psychological divisions, the novel is dividing into two sections, 'Going Away' and 'Coming Home.' But the character of Amitav Ghosh moves in so many directions that the identification of a separate and distinct home is finally blurred and the world, in which no race or caste borders are recognised, is a large place. The natural home lies far removed from all directions in one's



memory and awareness. The idea of "House" is more problems as the grandmother of the storyteller returns to her parental home in Dhaka in 1964 in the second half of the book. Although this return is full of irony and complexities. His grandmother would like his uncle to return to her Calcutta home from East Pakistan, the country of her Muslim enemies – but Dhaka is her homeland, the home to which she is returned. In the book, Grandmother represents a classical understanding of cultures. She feels nostalgic for the old country, where political and cultural divides were labelled. It is clear from her critique of cousin of the narrator Ila, who lives in England:

"Ila has no right to live there... It took those people a long time to build that country; hundreds of years, years, and years of war and bloodshed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood: their brother's blood and their father's blood and their son's blood. They know they're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood... That's what it takes to make a country... Once that happens, people forget they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood" (TSL - 78).

The novel of Ghosh. His fictionalised history is a visual reflection of subverted history, in which an effort is taken to cover holes and absences. The complot of *The Shadow Lines* revolves around historical developments such as the Second World War and the communal disturbances after the partition that occurred in some areas of India and Pakistan. Ghosh seems to indicate that the topic of gender was omitted by Indian nationalism, not included in its platform.

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The general trend of the nationalists was to think that compulsory suffrage would inevitably guarantee freedom and that the Congress Party never made any attempt to secure women's electoral seats until after independence. *The Shadow Lines* shows the delicacy of the division of nations, as laid out in maps and borders by nation-states which distinguish individuals, communities and families. He says that the essence of borders is known through the metaphor of the glass look: the national boundary between Indians and West Pakistan is similar



to the mirror boundary where self and other reflections are the same. The *Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh thus asserts a special role in postcolonial literature, which addresses postcolonial nationality and hybrid migration. Instead, Ghosh points to the transnationality of community and remembrance through critical of the gender-based abuse inflicted on small and minor bodies by the institutions and policies of nationalism and globalisation.

The Shadow Lines is a suitable discovery of the fragility of partition, the borderlines between countries and cartographic lines that pretend to divide populations and individuals. He offers these frontiers the symbol of looking glass in which any population sees its picture mirrored on the other side of the boundary. In Ghosh's view, borderline is not a divide that causes a radical difference in people's consciousness on either side of the frontier. Ghosh challenges the very foundation of democratic states. How many states remain in a continent or in a subcontinent doesn't matter. It does not change the people's well-being. Nationhood itself is a mirage since it is not logical. Ghosh explored the division of a new country and proclaimed the government machinery of power to be useless.

Thus, *The Shadow Lines* presents certain ideological subjects for the reader to assess such political motivations on the basis of an illogical axis. Culture is a distribution mechanism and has little to do with national boundaries. The Partition is a vivid expression of the argument that postcolonial nations are established in a violent breakup of an umbilical cord, a frontier strengthened by an unreasonable and remorseless aggression between nation states. The rhetoric of nationalism, though, makes sense of the unnecessary destruction of life. The novel showed the reader that the universe isn't just an atlas. Even, in these solid lines there are too many unavoidable truths that contribute to national violence and the brutal bloodshed. From national feelings, the borders between nations are like shadow lines, hate and animosity.



Reference-

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(Abbreviation TSL)

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