

AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES*: A YEARNING FOR A WORLD INHABITED BY A COMMON HUMANITY

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ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines echoes with a yearning for a world inhabited by a common humanity and not by nations. As humanity is solely represented by human beings with different names, it is needless to draw demarcations which are regarded as shadow lines by the writer. To establish his claim, the writer terms the boundaries as absurd illusions incapable of winning over memory. The writer also identifies the boundaries as the source of violence. As an outcome of nationalism or an extreme love for freedom, boundaries appear. Then it becomes the mother of terrorism. Chauvinism, religious fanaticism etc. gives impetus to this. The year 1947 marks the collapse of colonial British rule in Indian Sub-continent. Then lines were drawn up dividing the sub-continent into two parts namely India and Pakistan. As a result, Bengal was also divided into two – the West Bengal became the part of India when East Bengal was united with Pakistan taking the new name East Pakistan. Thousands of people were exiled. Three generations of a Bengali family dispersed across three countries as a consequence of this historical change. The partition fails to serve the real purpose being the freedom of people. In fact, it was an inversion of the expected result. This situation makes Ghosh interrogate the existence of boundary, the modern sense of freedom and nationality. Being utterly dissatisfied with the violence followed by the partition, Ghosh calls for doing away with borders to establish a world where only humanity will inhabit with a single identity abolishing different national identities. Throughout the novel, he presents many justifications for making his proposal well-grounded.

Keywords: Common Humanity, Boundary, Freedom, Nationalism, Violence.

INTRODUCTION

The narrative of *The Shadow Lines* begins in 1939, the year when the Second World War commenced. An unnamed narrator tells us the story. It is the story of three generations of the narrator's family spread over Calcutta (Kolkata), Dhaka and London. To say the truth, *The Shadow Lines* ends essentially in 1964 when a cycle of violence erupts in both India and Pakistan. In 1939, at the age of eight, the narrator's father's cousin Tridib goes to England, and in 1964, he is murdered by a mob near his father's original family home in Dhaka. Thus his boyhood experiences in war-time London and his violent killing twenty five years later in Dhaka contribute to the constitution of the end points of the novel's essential narrative. The relationship woven around families of Datta-Chaudhri's of Bengal and the Prices of London continues for three generations. Going through the story of the novel, we come across the partition of 1947 that divides the Indian sub-continent into two parts. The two parts of Bengal become the parts of two different independent countries – India and Pakistan. We also know about the narrator's two different realizations of the boundaries drawn between two countries. His boyhood belief in demarcations is shattered by his adulthood mature understanding of the same. Tha'mma (grandmother) is a vital character who also experiences two different notions

of idealism regarding Dhaka which is her place of birth. Her one experience is before her grandson Tridib's killing and another follows the tragic incident. The violence following the partition raises questions regarding the existing political system of border lines and the modern idea of nation. Tridib tells us a dream of a 'better place, a place without borders and countries' (Ghosh, 1988). As these factors cannot serve the true purpose, the writer yearns for a world where only a common humanity will live and there will be no place for multinational identities.

DO BOUNDARIES REALLY EXIST?

This is one of the dominant issues placed by Amitav Ghosh in his *The Shadow Lines*. According to the theory of modern political geography, an independent country means the inevitable existence of the demarcation surrounding the country to mark its separate identity independent of neighbouring countries. To materialize the theory, boundaries were drawn between the newly independent India and Pakistan. Bangladesh, the then East Pakistan, was separated from West Bengal of India by boundary lines to be a part of Independent Pakistan.

The unnamed narrator of the novel holds a belief in his childhood regarding the physical substance of border. He thinks that the other side of the border means another reality. His mature realization of adulthood reveals to him that his childhood belief is a 'mirage'. The novel offers a minute detail of the deceptive nature of the national borders constructed to project an image of difference across political divides. The narrator's grandmother has a firm belief in the ability of national boundaries to distinguish between her own community and others. Thamma's this belief is undermined when the novel unfolds in 1964. While planning her visit to Dhaka, she wonders whether she would be able to see the demarcation lines between India and East Pakistan from the plane. To mock at this thought, her grandson asks her if the border is a long black line with a green on one side and scarlet on the other side as shown in the school atlas. In reply, she expresses her expectation to find trenches or soldiers or guns pointing at each other or even no man's land there. When she is told that she should expect clouds and at the most some green fields, she is simply astonished and her natural response is:

But if there aren't trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, wher's the difference then? And if there's no difference, both sides will be the same; it' ll be just like it used to before , when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all for then- partition and all the killing and everything _ if there isn't something in between? (Ghosh, 1988)

Thus 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. She is utterly surprised when she is further told that 'the borders aren't on the frontier: its right inside the airport. You'll see. You'll cross it when you have to fill in all those disembarkation cards and things. And to her surprise, she feels that 'her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality' (Ghosh, 1988).

The logic that worked behind the partition seems somewhat illogical. There is a similarity between the lines that divide India from Pakistan and the lines of the circle the narrator draws on the map with the help of his compass and pencil. These lines are nothing but the whims of politicians and are unable to enforce cultural difference. Even they cannot separate the two communities living across the border. There must be something to connect India to East

Pakistan and Calcutta to Dhaka. It is not surprising that the grandmother's old uncle refuses to leave Dhaka and migrate to India.

The demarcations or the shadow lines are not strong enough to wipe out something from one's memory. Though Tha'mma is going to Dhaka, she says that she is coming to Dhaka. The fact is that she views her journey to Dhaka as returning her own home.

Even religion in this novel has a stronger influence than the national boundaries and is able enough to evoke a sense of loyalty and belonging which supersedes the one generated by a sense of nationalism. The desecration of the Hazratbal shrine in Srinagar creates communal frenzy not only in Calcutta but also in Dhaka which is outside of the political boundaries of India. The same happens following the attack on Babri Mosque of India in 1990's. The Muslim Community of Bangladesh becomes shocked at it and they take it as a violent and insulting assault on their religion. Exploiting this religious sentiment, some mean and fake religious people from the Muslims and some materialistic Hindus destroyed and looted many temples in Bangladesh.

In fact, the absurdity of the partition is a dominant concern of *The Shadow Lines* and Ghosh's narrative puts light on this theme frequently. The story of the partition of the grandmother's (Tha'mma) ancestral house in Dhaka is a metaphorical and comic example of this theme. When Tha'mma is still a young Child, their house is partitioned with the dividing lines going through doorways and the lavatory bisecting an old commode. Even the old nameplate is divided into two. This farcical act questions the logic of the political division of the nation. The meaninglessness of the demarcations is further demonstrated by Ghosh. He tells us that identical realities exist across territorial division. These are originally meant to present the differences. During her childhood, Tha'mma and her sister visualize the other side of the partitioned house to be upside down as an inverted image of their part of the house. Surprisingly enough, when they return to Dhaka to rescue their uncle, they find out that on the other side of the line there lies an identical reality. Thus category of difference and otherness is proved to be deceptive construct, a fabrication of our mind like an illusion having no grounding realities. In this regard, the following lines are worth-mentioning:

“Born in Dhaka and forced to migrate to Calcutta as a consequence of the bloodshed of the partition, Tha'mma feels that her sense of political identity- that being an Indian citizen- is at odds with her nostalgic longing for her roots that lies outside the political and geographical boundaries of India in Dhaka” (Sati, 2013)

MODERN IDEA OF NATION AND FREEDOM- A SUBJECT OF MUCH DEBATE

Amitav Ghosh interrogates modern idea of nation and freedom in his *The Shadow Lines* by presenting their shallowness. What he attempts to opine about these notions of nation and freedom held and practised in modern world is appropriately explained in the following critical comment of Someshwar Sati:

Is the nation a homogeneous entity? This is a fundamental question that *The Shadow Lines* raises. It also furnishes the reader with a univocal answer – a firm and emphatic ‘No’. Writing about the reasons for writing this novel Amitav Ghosh had revealed in a leading American magazine that the ghastly events that followed the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi (1984) had deeply pained him. He was unable to understand how a community that was essentially Indian- the Sikhs could be made the victim of such an inhuman massacre by their own non-Sikh countrymen. This incident had convinced him that there were deep fissures within the body polity of the

Indian nation and it was this incident that inspired him to write *The Shadow Lines* (Sati, 2013).

The present trend of diaspora really questions the uniqueness of a nation based on geographical boundary only. Bhikhu Parekh comments, "No self-image of India can be complete without a reference to its diaspora. Contrary to the myth that we Indians have been reluctant to travel abroad, a good part of our history is enacted outside India. The Buddhist missionaries to South, South East and Central Asia, Hindu traders in East Africa, West Africa, South East Asia and elsewhere, indentured labourers in different parts of the British empire, and recent Indian immigrants to the West are all examples of this. Thanks to the Indian diaspora of about twenty million people, Just as India is being globalised; the globe too is being indianised" (Parekh, 2010).

To achieve freedom in political sense, we have to gain boundary to reach the formation of a nation. But the freedom is also a relative dimension. Freedom is a kind of illusion to Roby. He says that if freedom were possible through killings, then Tridib's death would have set him free. But a chance remark by a waiter in a restaurant sets his hand shaking like a leaf, fifteen years after the inhuman act, thousands of miles away in another continent. Even the division and subdivision of the continent fail to change the dismal situation.

VIOLENCE – BOTH INSTRUMENT AND RESULT REGARDING BOUNDARY, NATION AND FREEDOM

To establish boundary and nation and thereby gain freedom, making violence instrumental is a common case. But it is frustrating that the violence that follows these achievements is crullers and more barbarous than that applied in the way of attaining them. This harsh reality is shockingly presented by Amitav Ghosh. In this novel, a bright example for militant nationalism is Tha'mma. She has nurtured nationalist dream and experienced the setbacks and success that give it its character. Her faith makes her link the national and domestic, public service and personal activity. Each evening she insists that her grandson goes for a run. She advises him that he cannot build a strong country without building a strong body. While saying so, she pushes him out of the house. Her militant nationalism finds an expression in her explanation of the creed of the English and relating it to the Indian context:

War is their religion. 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. That is what you have to achieve for India, don't you see? (Ghosh, 1988)

Later on, her chauvinistic zeal is evident when she gives away her cherished necklace for the war fund in 1965. She justifies her this action to her grand soon saying, I gave it away [...] I gave it to the fund for the war. I had to, don't you see? For your sake; for your freedom. We have to kill them before they kill us; we have to wipe them out' (Ghosh, 1988).

Now Tha'mma differentiates between her present nation and the nation of her birth place by using 'us' and 'them'. This is the partition of 1947 that makes fellow people enemies.

Communalism is an ugly face of nationalism. We are told an incident by the narrator in which this negative aspect of nationalism is clearly manifest. The silence and crafty mob are in wait at street corner in Calcutta as the school bus carrying children speeds through the city. It is a time when rumours of the city's water supply being poisoned are doing rounds and fare the young children. The narrator goes on, 'That particular fear has a texture you can neither forget nor describe. It is like the fear of the victims of an earthquake, of people who have lost faith in the stillness of the earth (Gosh, 1988).

The trauma as an outcome of is nicely furnished in these lines:

As an echo of Partition, the communal riot (through which it `speaks`) serves as a reminder that Partition- which according to the protocols of nation-state is seen as a necessary and foundational moment in the history of the nation-achieved nothing. Each communal riot is a reminder that Partition resolved nothing. Far from being necessary, it is shown to have been unnecessary, its horrors unmitigated by the consolation of success (Anshuman, 2010).

To present the shocking and unexpected picture of the incidents as a result of communal riot after the partition, the words of Kuldip Nayar can also be cited. He has to migrate to Inida from his home town Sialkot in Pakistan:

It was an avalanche of migration. Humanity in it entirely appeared to be on the move on both sides. No one expected it; no one wanted it, but none could prevent it. The two countries blamed each other as they tried to grapple with the unexpected tragedy and the other concomitant and chaotic problems of Partition after experiencing a few heady days that Independence had brought (Nayar, 2012).

The most crucial section of the novel is the account of Tridib's death. His brother Roby gives it after fifteen years of the event. Roby has been haunted by the same nightmare for long years and he describes it in a powerful and easy mix of dream and unreality. Roby mourns, `If only that dream would go away, I would be like other people; I would be free. I would have given anything to be free of that memory (Ghosh, 1988).

Roby goes on to say that the single word `free` causes the killing of people at the hands of terrorists and separatists and the army and the police in Assam, the North- East, Punjab, Srilanka and Tripura. Everyone is doing it to be free.

The people of the Indian sub-continent are baffled as Partition gifts then disorder and terrorism. Khushwant Sing rightly opines:

The Communal massacres of 1946-47 and Partition created two illusions in our minds. We felt that the Muslims having got their Pakistan, those that remained -11-12 percent of the population-would be easily integrated in the Indian mainstream. And somehow the experience of Gandhism in action would prevent communal riots from erupting. Unfortunately, both hopes proved illusory. It did not take very long for the communal virus to re-erupt in even more virulent form and afflict most of the country- the entire Gangetic plain down to Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu were affected (Singh, 2001).

A WORLD INHABITED BY A COMMON HUMANITY

Tridib speaks of going ` to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror (Ghosh, 1998). This transcendental view of Tridib closes the gap between imagination and reality. Only a man like Tridib can reach forth to others. It is irony of fate that he could realize his dream in death. While trying to say a helpless old man from being attacked by a frenzied mob, he must know that he is not going there to come back alive. In spite of this fact, he does so as at the very moment the border between `oneself and one's image in the mirror' stops for him. This marks his final redemption.

Ghosh seems to seek a solution for the problems that the existing notions of boundary, freedom and nationality create. He finds his answer in a common humanity regardless of religion, caste, boundary and national identity. Sooth to say, it is the humanity that should rule the world and we, modern people, have dissected it by giving different names terming them as nationalities. But there is no chance for us to misinterpret Ghosh. As to Fakrul Alam:

Ghosh makes it quite clear that he does not endorse globalization at any moment since the concept entails flattening out differences only to satisfy the omnivorous maws of multinational capitalism. Similarly, he will not approve rigid ideas about nationalism or religious movements based on notions of purity or exclusion of groups who do not conform to the majority's obsessions about the nation or faith (Alam, 2007).

The novelist presents Tridib as a citizen of the world in the true sense of the term. Through him, he has sought to bring the peoples of the worlds closer. In this attempt to do so, he has questioned the meaning of political freedom and the force of nationalism in the modern world perspective. The blitz in war-time in London, civil strife in Post-Partition Bengal communal riots in Calcutta have served as tools in his attempt. Alpana Neoga's comment in this regard can sum up the very essence of Ghosh's yearning for a world inhabited by a common humanity. Alpana says that the following song of John Lennon written in 1975 that stirred a generation might have inspired Amitav Ghosh, when he created the character of tridib:

Imagine there are no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too.
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace [...]
Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing the entire world [...] (Neogy, 2013)

CONCLUSION

The dream of Amitav Ghosh may sound utopian to many. But if not fully possible, at least another dimension of this dream may be fulfilled. Retaining the modern notion of boundary seemingly essential for an independent geo-political identity and refining the zeal of nationalism by following the essence of humanity, we can hope for a better world. If in the field of business, the world is treated as a global market and the amazing development of information technology can make the world a global village, a world based on a global humanity is not impossible. For economic and political purpose, we are doing treaties, forming organizations, making our friends enemies and vice-versa. So, if we are sincere enough and can truly realize the ultimate necessity of us, we must be able to develop a global humanity, that is, a common humanity to rule the world single handed.

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