



Exploring the Impact of National Borders and Identity Trauma in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract: *Historic nationalist problems such as colonial hegemony, Diasporas, migration, refugees, and social and cultural economic issues like castes and classes have been the concerns of post-colonial writers. Amitav Ghosh, a post-modernist writer, is deeply influenced by post-independent India's political and cultural milieu. His novel, The Shadow Lines, challenges nationalistic myths in a post-colonial state. Ghosh's works consistently explore the issues of frontiers and boundaries between nations. The novel itself is highly imaginative, complex, and popular. The dominant concern in Ghosh's narrative is the absurdity of partition. This paper focuses on the theme of national boundaries and identity, examining the trauma experienced by the characters through the lens of postcolonial theories. This paper is designed to address the problem of national identity with Ghosh's criticism.*

Keywords: *National boundaries, Identity, Trauma, Partition*

Introduction

Post-colonial Indian English writers such as Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, and Amitav Ghosh have liberated Indian English literature from its colonial past, infusing it with distinctive voices, strength, and self-confidence. The tragic event of partition provided these authors with an opportunity to depict the people's condition. In Indian novels, the partition is portrayed as a dystopian subject that explores the unique characters shaped by migration between territories. Ghosh, in his novel, investigates into concepts of ethnicity, national boundaries, identity, and diasporas, which involve connections between individuals that sometimes transcend political frontiers. This novel represents Ghosh's direct confrontation with nationalism and national identity, focusing on the personal identity of each character. Additionally, it encompasses a period rich in memories.

Amitav Ghosh's novel, *The Shadow Lines*, explores the intricate relationship between national boundaries and the trauma experienced by individuals grappling with their identities. Against the backdrop of historical events and personal narratives, Ghosh weaves together the consequences of geopolitical divisions on human lives, challenging conventional notions of nationhood.

The Shadow Lines narrates the journey of a three-generation Bengali family transitioning from colonialism to post-colonialism, both mentally and physically, as they move from Dhaka to Calcutta, forging a new imagined identity. Rather than drawing solely from historical narratives found in national



archives, the novel emerges from the gaps, breaches, and silences within those public accounts. The narrator heavily relies on private memories to reconstruct their story. The narrator listens to the tales of the grandma, Tridib, Ila and finally Robi and May, which remember their versions from the past, and then becomes an archive of their family stories. Nevertheless, he is still interested in the imagined reenactment of past times, places, events and people; he is ultimately searching for meaning, explanations and reasons, for the elusive formal or causal logic that makes sense of the narrator's history and of the national biography interwoven with it. The novel *The Shadow Lines* offers a variety of concepts and is linked to transboundary circumstances. It also has importance to the growth of civilization and global frontiers which indicates that all lines are shadow lines. There have been concerns about the very notion of modern nation states.

Ghosh challenges the illusion of fixed boundaries, questioning their significance in the face of shared histories and interconnected lives. The characters in *The Shadow Lines* navigate transnational connections and overlapping identities, defying limitations imposed by national borders. Ghosh dismantles the notion of rigid nationhood, emphasizing the fluidity of human connections and universal bonds that transcend political divisions.

According to the author, national boundaries divide people rather than unite them. The concept of nationhood based on geographical lines drawn by nature is merely an illusion. The novel portrays a cosmopolitan setting, with significant events taking place in London, Dhaka, and the protagonist residing in Calcutta. It beautifully captures the emergence of modernism in India. National identity, therefore, must be understood politically, socially, economically, and emotionally. The novel explores issues of identification within a national identity and the sense of unity that transcends political boundaries.

As a cultural anthropologist, the protagonist reflects on the current global situation during his visits to foreign countries. Ghosh's novels span the globe, and *The Shadow Lines* explores into the national divide accompanied by political awareness. It emphasizes the emergence of a new world order within the capitalist system, where traditional borders are overshadowed by transnational development and consumer expansion. The character Ila's unfortunate experience living in a foreign country illustrates the sense of not belonging anywhere. While India may not appeal to Ila, she yearns to be part of larger events alongside the narrator.

In this book, the ideal way of life is depicted as being outside of one's own nation. This viewpoint is particularly appealing due to the rise of international capitalism and the global market, which prioritize independence from national borders. Ghosh's work challenges the process through which a sense of national identity is formed. The construction of national identity is seen as a combination of both unifying and distinguishing factors. The idea of a cohesive state or culture implies its differences from others. While Indians share a common community and collective aspirations, this very concept of being Indian sets them apart from Pakistanis, Americans, or English individuals. Ghosh, who is hitting at the core of this national phenomenon, reveals that a nation's concept is deceptive. As Suvir Kaul rightly points out, *The Shadow Line* is an 'architecture of silence, a gradual brushing away of modern Indian memory's weaving and a frequent return to the absences and fissures that are at the height of suffering of individuals and nationals' (P. 269)

By rising from adolescence to maturity, the author has shown that the notion of the national frontier is merely a mirage. The confusing essence of the national borders, which are designed to show the difference between political split, is exposed in the novel. The grandmother of the narrator firmly believes that her own culture should separate from others on the national borders. As the novel unfolds, her nationalist views appear to be undermined. When her grandson mocks her asking, if the border line was a long black line, she says, "of course not. But surely there's something – trenches perhaps, or soldiers or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strip of land. Don't they call it no-man's



land?" (The Shadow Lines, P. 167) The grandmother's dream of a boundary is normal, yet ludicrous, to others with her experience of the traumatic events of the partition. The unfolding of the novel causes the grandmother to understand that the two sides of the border are essentially a mirror image each other's. In some way this revelation scares her and prompts her to ask for the very meaning and the motives for war between nations of the nationalist movement. She attempts to affirm that a real demarcation is necessary.

Ghosh is not alone in perceiving nationalism as a catalyst for violent conflicts and recognizing its constructed nature. However, he mistakenly asserts that nationalism is no longer relevant. The author highlights the arbitrary nature of the partition between India and Pakistan, emphasizing the illogical and random nature of the division. The boundary lines simply reflect the whims of politicians and fail to define the cultural uniqueness that exists between the two groups living along the border. The connection between India, specifically Calcutta, and East Pakistan, namely Dhaka, persists in various forms despite political divisions. Thus, political boundaries are subjective and arbitrary, as they are merely assumed and presumed.

The tale of the characters in the novel is never told in context; instead it corresponds to the development, for three decades or more, of Calcutta as a city and India as a state. Importantly, private events of great political take place in the life of the author and other significant characters in the shadow of events. The family is not necessarily there as a demonstration, but as a way of discussing the topics at the heart of this project. Therefore, Tha'mma, the grandma of the narrator who addresses the problem of the Bengal partition and the whole notion of state, nationalism and nationhood. Political divide between nations is, to say the least, a ludicrous act. The author also states that it is not possible for the nationalist leadership to blame for this assumption, as this was the pattern all over the world at the time. Ghosh points out the ineffectiveness of the notion that nationalist powers could counter people's separationist patterns. *The Shadow Lines* are also the lines that divide human beings from each other, not just borders between nations. Therefore, they are disillusioned because the most intimate relationships end in distaste and alienation (Ila and the narrator), and unexpectedly foreign people across the sea become intimate friends (Tridib and May).

The novel highlights the clash between the philosophy of the nation state and subcontinental cultures. It suggests that being Indian means defining oneself against a mirror image across the border, albeit unsuccessfully. The book demonstrates that social and national conflicts, as well as geographical distances, fail to offer a solution by dividing the larger nation-state. It shows that aggression is not confined to the frontiers, as Dhaka and Calcutta, two different cities in independent states, do not drift apart despite occasional flare-ups. The violence patterns in these cities connect them to each other. The narrator embarks on a journey to a transcendent land that exists beyond physical boundaries, where events resemble reflections in a looking glass. The narrator is astonished to find that the border does not separate these places but rather locks them into an inseparable symmetry. He witnessed identical scenes of violence on both sides, with few human incidents of saving lives - indicative of indivisible sanity that binds people to each other independent of their governments. The borderline becomes just "a looking glass border". (The Shadow Lines, P. 247) She had been testifying about her regional division at childhood, which led her grandma implicitly to believe that the border between India and East Pakistan would be clear. She thus assumed that the boundaries be visible and that, if the gap and rivalry between the two nations were not expressed unequivocally, the lines on the ground should be clearly marked by 'trenching or something' else which was the point of so many acts of violence and bloodshed during the 1947 splitting of India.

The character of Tha'mma plays a vital role in the narrative by highlighting certain concepts and serving as a focal point for alternative perspectives. Tha'mma represents a conventional yet intriguing belief system that is challenged by other characters and the novelist himself. Throughout most of the



book, she appears as a practical and thrifty woman who despises any form of wastage, be it time or money. Her views on the nation and nation-building are notably simplistic. She does not perceive herself as a migrant from the other side of the border, showing no sympathy for her refugee relatives living in extreme poverty. Thamma's understanding of the nation and nation-building aligns closely with what is found in history books. She considers individuals like Robi, who are young and healthy, as ideal contributors to nation-building. Remarkably, she lacks any traces of cynicism often associated with victims of partition.

Ghosh challenges the notion of separate national or cultural truths, highlighting the arbitrary nature of divisions and delimitations. The narrator fearlessly addresses both national and international political issues, problematizing the concept of national identity. The author questions the historical constructions of identity, such as state, nationality, and nationalism, exposing their unreality and invalidity. In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh portrays the scenes of violence along borders and the sense of solidarity with people from other countries, transcending the glass barrier of divisions. The novel aims to construct a global context that encompasses diverse cultures, presenting a cohesive and unified global picture. The emergence of borders has resulted in a painful experience of crossing for individuals, challenging the ideology behind these divisions. History demonstrates that maps are not solely determined by power structures; they can be questioned and challenged by people. In a globalized setting, people are united not only across borders but also across various boundaries defined by culture, gender, class, and religion. Comparatively, colonial legacy is the idea of nation-state which separates people based on culture, ethnicity, gender and language. It challenges global, racial and cultural frontiers aims and the validity. Thamma was born and raised in Dhaka, the grandma of the author. She lived in many parts of Bangladesh until she was thirty-two years old. She came to Calcutta after her husband's death to work in teaching, then twenty-seven years as headmaster of a girl's school. In the meantime in 1947 India and Pakistan were split according to ethnicity. Her grandmother knows she lived in Calcutta, the son of her uncle Jethamoshai. Thamma begs his son to take her to the house of their relative, shocked by the news that his relative was present in Calcutta. The wife of the son of her uncle discovers that her uncle still lives, lives alone in his ancient Dhaka home, and is cared for by a Muslim family of refugees. She also comes to know that a person is running a garage in the compound of their house. Forgetting the trouble her uncle had given during her girlhood days, Thamma decides to bring Jethamoshai, known as Ukil-babu, back to India.

The fundamental nationalism has also emerged from the character of the grandmother of the author. She is a conservative extremist who wants freedom. She is adamant about liberty. We see that she wanted to join it and could do anything for the nation when it was young during the Swadeshi movement. But the author shows that so-called nationalism has no worth at all. She says, "I'd killed it for our freedom." Here Thamma does not see racism ruined her home and blood poured out on her family. "We should destroy them before they kill us," she says, "until the end she fails to realize that national freedom does not mean personal freedom in any war." (TSL, P. 189) Ghosh precedes that nations are not created naturally and limits are not set but mental. Therefore, in the name of nation war and bloodshed are not permissible. There is persistent concern about the nature of separation between countries on religious lines. Religion also has nothing to do with the life of the social group. It has nothing to do with the country. Ghosh claims we should stop drawing boundaries and separating populations because this will not end and new countries can be subdivided further until they are entirely nuclear. This idea is expressed by the words of Jethamoshai. In her own simple way, she

"Boundaries were created and people were forced to alter their lives and selves to accommodate them to the conceptual nations that the powerful persons had created would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane." (TSL, P. 90)



The dream of the country of the grandmother is based on war and bloodshed. She tells her story about a boy who had a link with terrorists during her school days. The narrator asked her how she would have done; she said she wanted to help them and she did nothing free to destroy them. The planet has become a global village in the postcolonial sense. No nation can live apart from the world outside. Ghosh therefore mocks the view of the separatists by drawing lines, because they are actually drawing shadow lines. They might have hoped “the bits of land would sail away from one another like the shifting tectonic plates of the prehistoric Gondwanaland” (TSL,P. 233). But the irony is that “Dhaka and Calcutta are 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-our looking glass border” (TSL, P. 233).

The Shadow Lines blurs the boundaries of cultures and races. For example, the family of the latter live as two families, the family of Lionel Tresawsen and Justice Datta Chaudhuri. Cultural transition on both sides and acculturation takes place because the members of these families travel frequently. Ghosh flutes the boundary between spoken and voiceless. Ila gets her full education abroad. If media and politicians promote rumors, the harbingers of all major conflicts, for example, arise. Ghosh is keenly interested in narrative devices. *The Shadow Lines* is an apt illustration of this. The study reveals that its various parts and narrative devices contribute to its organic structure and major concerns.

The time-shift is naturalized by memory and the chronology of events in the novel begins in 1939, when Tridib was 8-13 years before the birth of the narrator, and closes some time before or even beyond the revelation of Tridib's death. Much is remembered from the historic occurrences such as the Second World War, the Indian Partition in 1947, Bengali freedom movement, East Pakistan and India communal riots in the wake of 1964 Hazratbal in Srinagar. A alert is not made in order for incidents to happen. Also at different times, several private things were recollected. Story in the story is Ghosh's main narrative technique, which complements the main concerns of the media.

The author argues that the boundaries drawn on the earth's surface are symbolic, incapable of separating one's mind, imagination, and sense of nativity. The administrators who believed in the power of these lines hoped that by delineating borders between India and Pakistan, the two nations would peacefully coexist like shifting tectonic plates of the ancient Gondwanaland. Thamma, a timid boy who joined a secret terrorist society at the age of fourteen, exemplifies Ghosh's quest for British freedom. In the district of Khulna, he orchestrated the assassination of an English judge but was apprehended by the police before he could carry out his mission. This incident deeply impacted Thamma, May, and Robi, who witnessed it and struggled to overcome the shock. Even after fifteen years, Robi still feels haunted by the event, his hands trembling at its memory. The novel explores the psychological ramifications of this incident, as well as other historical events like World War II and the partition of India, which expose human lives to communal violence. The concept of freedom, portrayed as a mirage, is represented by the countless lines dividing the subcontinent, mere shadow lines separating nations. Interestingly, the narrator's grandmother, unlike the younger characters, longs for war to rectify the situation, perceiving the shadow lines as a rational solution. The novel probes into the importance of past experiences in shaping the future, emphasizing the deep-rooted love for one's homeland that prevents people from leaving their lands at any moment. The novel examines conflicting concepts of liberty through Tha'mma, the protagonist's grandmother, and his cousin Ila. Tha'mma, born in 1902 during the British invasion of India, believed in the utmost importance of gaining independence from British rule. She even expressed her desire to join terrorists in targeting British government officials. The narrator, when discussing liberty with Uncle Robi, May, and others, realizes that while freedom of thought is deeply cherished and essential to individuals, achieving true freedom is nearly



impossible. Robi firmly believes that he will never be free from the haunting memory of Tridib's tragic death, which he witnessed firsthand. The author argues that the Indian Subcontinent will never be truly liberated from the lasting effects of Britain's animosity and hatred, even long after gaining independence. Additionally, May's wife remains trapped in an unhappy marriage, unable to break free. The novel primarily focuses on how individuals handle circumstances based on their age, particularly from the narrator's perspective. To explore these gaps, the author employs storytelling, often presenting multiple perspectives. This is evident when Ila shares a story during their game of Houses, recounting an incident where a racist classmate assaulted their son and their doll, Magda.

The Shadow Lines narrative provides an overall overview of all speeches in post-colonial Indian society. Its mix of speeches is an attack on the man's and history's monological interpretations. The author creates a sense of doubt and uncertainty about the character by not naming it. Ghosh wants to challenge, for example, the tyranny and hegemony of the institutionalized discourses that prevail in society, the very definition of nationalism, by developing a number of different but equally valid voices. The novel reflects on the importance and complexities of politics in contemporary life in their entirety. The lives of the characters in this novel are largely determined by their idea of freedom and the belief, on the other hand, is colored by history. Amitav Ghosh acknowledges that in a changing world there are different strands of nationalism and ideology. He seeks to explore the possibilities by posing these important questions in all their different dimensions: human and political freedom.

Conclusion

The colonial discourses established East and West binaries. The West is depicted as educated, modern, willing, creative, intelligent and individual, and so on, where the East is portrayed as uncivilized, primitive, incompetent, bumpy, inhuman, etc. In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh's purpose is not to refute nationalism but to stress the need to liberate oneself from any kind of framework so that one can achieve a truly postcolonial identity. It asks deeply about our origins, our personalities and also questions at the same time. Though the events narrated in the novel keep changing their time and space it does not create any disharmony in the plot. Rather these both merges harmoniously and add to the charm of the novel.

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