



'Cross-Cultural Interactions -Shadowiness of Existing Borders' in Amitav Ghosh's "The Shadow Lines"

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ABSTRACT

Ghosh is a novelist given to generic inventiveness and champion of post-modern cultural weightlessness, but his writing is as interested in the ties that bind as in the transitory nature of global culture. "The Shadow Lines" is a highly innovative, complex and celebrated novel by Amitav Ghosh. The novel has become the leading hero in the literary development of our time precisely because it best of all reflects the tendencies of a new world still in the making. It moves through an intricate weaving backwards and forwards in time. 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. This search for invisible links ranging across the realities of nationality, the cultural segregation and racial discrimination is the central theme of "The Shadow Lines". It gains stature by placing the individual themes starkly in a contemporary context. The shadow lines divide and link peoples and nations.

Keywords: Cross Culture, Socio-political, Violence, Nationalism, Communities.

Ghosh's novel 'shows the realistic novelist's capacity to catch the telling and placing details of the appearance of things, and an acute ear for speech and dialogue' he is aiming at something more profound: a 'poetic truth' which is deeper and more comprehensive than the mere fidelity to the fact which we expect in the work of the historian. Henry James said that "It is the art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance." And Amitav Ghosh's text precisely does that. It creates a piece of 'virtual life' which is significant. That is why, 'it speaks to the world' and satisfies the parameters set by the 'works' of literary art - parameters, say, of organization and clarity as manifest in an art form, which is at the same time, the delineation of some vital aspect of life - in this case, a socio-political reality of our times. Ghosh is a novelist given to generic inventiveness and champion of post-modern cultural weightlessness, but his writing is as interested in the ties that bind as in the transitory nature of global culture. He

has, over the years, brought substance and range to Indian English fiction and indeed, added richly to the literature of the subcontinent as a whole.

"The Shadow Lines" is a highly innovative, complex and celebrated novel by Amitav Ghosh. Published in 1988, it received the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award the following year. Not only literary critics but also some noted litterateurs have acclaimed it for what it has been able to achieve as a work of art. It is a book that captures the perspective of time and events, of lines that bring people together and hold them apart, lines that are visible on one perspective and nonexistent on another. Lines exist in the memory of one, and therefore in another's imagination.

The novel is set against the backdrop of historical events like the Swadeshi movement, the Second World War, the Partition of India and the Communal riots of 1963-64 in Dhaka and Calcutta. Its focus is a fact of history, the post-partition scenario of violence; but its overall form is a subtle interweaving of fact, fiction and reminiscence.

The novel has become the leading hero in the literary development of our time precisely because it best of all reflects the tendencies of a new world still in the making. Bakhtin identified the novel as the "open-ended" literary form of the modern age, reflecting and bringing together many languages ("heteroglossia").

There are several lines of the family introduced- that of the narrator, based in Calcutta; that of his grandmother's sister, associated with Dhaka, and two further lines bringing into the story Robi and Ila. But the blood relationships merge with those forged by intimacy, as with the British family, linked through the domicile in India, of Lionel Tresawson. The narrator's closest links are with Mayadebi, his grandmother's sister, and with her sori Tridib, the enigmatic older friend. For if "Circle of Reason" is about 'Knowledge', "The Shadow Lines" is about 'Knowing'. The novel moves through an intricate weaving backwards and forwards in time.

'The organizing principle of any society is war. The authority of the state over its people resides in its war powers' - Oliver Stone's JFK: A film on Cold War. Homi K. Bhabha, in his introduction to "Nation & Narration" (1990) rightly observes: 'Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their potential in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation - or narration - might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from these traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea (..) an idea whose cultural compulsion lies in the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force'. Bhabha seems to corroborate Ernest Renan's observation in the latter's essay "What is a Nation" Renan Says:

'I would even go so far as to say historically that error is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for the principle of nationalism' (Nation and Narration,

11). It should be clear that 'nation' to Renan and Bhabha becomes a 'construct' rather than a concrete reality, having more shadow than substance. As a logical corollary to this is the idea of 'nationalism' which is fallacious - a propaganda exercise, full of gaps and fissures. Ernest Gellner seems to drive home this point in "Thought and Change" (1964). "Nationalism is not the awaking of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist"(Gellner, 169).

Violence is not always physical or tangible; it can be unleashed through powerful discursive practices to circulate the dominant ideology through the body-Politik. The novel follows the life of a young boy growing up in Calcutta and later on in Delhi and London. His family - the Datta Chaudharis - and the Prices in London are linked by the friendship between their respective patriarchs - Justice Dattachaudhari and Alan Tresawson. The narrator adores Tridib because of his tremendous knowledge and his perspective of the incidents and places. Tha'mma has a dreadful past and wants to reunite her family and goes to Dhaka to bring back her uncle. Tridib is in love with May and sacrificed his life to rescue her from mobs in the communal riots of 1963-64 in Dhaka.

The motif of violence looms large throughout "The Shadow Lines". It forms the endpoints of the actual narrative. The narrative begins in 1939-the year of the outbreak of the Second World War-and essentially ends in 1964 with the eruption of riots in Dhaka and Calcutta. Tridib's boyhood experiences in war-torn London in 1939 and his violent murder 25 years later by a rioting mob in Dhaka constitute the end-points of the main narrative.

These two instances of the destructive force of violent nationalism mark not only the actual period of the novel but also probe the legitimacy of the nation-states. Amitav Ghosh's "The Shadow Lines" centres on the shadowiness of existing borders. The novel is an archaeology of silences, a slow brushing away of the cobwebs of modern Indian memory, a repeated return to those absences and fissures that mark the sites of personal and national trauma.

This scrutiny becomes much more significant in the light of the 'looking-glass' metaphor located precisely at these very markers of the novel, namely: Tresawsen's description of nationalist Jingoism in Germany, though in a 'grotesque' way, during the Second World War, and Tha'mma's disappointment with the Indo-Pak border on her trip to Dhaka when she could not spot a tangible difference, a physical demarcation between the two nations. Her nationalist faith gets a severe jolt at such an absence, which rips apart her whole ideology. "What was it all for then - partition and all the killing and everything - if there isn't something in between?"

Tha'mma's nationalist vocabulary is couched in the language of modernity, which, particularly in its colonial derivation, requires the syntax of good citizenship and an exclusive national pride. But, as her grandson rightly points out, her tragedy is the tragedy of the entire middle class. The novel can then be seen as a story of mirror-image relations between periods and between places – 'the contemporaneity' and 'the past', 'historical memory' and 'the present', and 'different times and places' and 'one's own'. Far from insignificant, Ghosh's introduction of these

reflective mirror images into his fiction renders him dissimilar to writers like E. M. Forster or several writers from India. His characters are all provided with their mirror images. To name just a few: Tridib and the narrator as archaeologists; Ila and Tha'mma as polarists; Tresawsen and Nick as mercantilists; and Nick and Ila as Orientalists.

However, as A.N. Kaul rightly says, "Ghosh's proclamation of the death of nationalism is premature". Realities cannot be wished away just because one calls them illusions, and "The Shadow Lines" bears testimony to this without being conscious of this paradoxical position. The narrator, despite his imaginative explorations beyond boundaries, cannot think beyond his locale in Calcutta. During his college days in Delhi (beyond the scope of this Tha'mma's vigilance) he used to visit whores - an act which violates the propriety of a Bengali middle-class *bhadralok*. He can fantasize about relationships with Ila or May, who are figures of desire owing to their 'foreignness'. These fantasies provide an outlet for the narrator, who typifies the sex-starved provincial Bengali youth. Again, the incident of the Grand Hotel - Where Ila is restrained from dancing with a stranger by Robi and the narrator - underlines the gender (in) sensitivity of the Bengali youth, who are cosmopolitan in their sensibility but are enforcers of national difference and patriarchal authority when it comes to women, Ghosh's treatment of the precarious, tensed community relationship in India also conforms to exclusive national identity and cultural symbols: vermilion for Hindus, burkas for Muslims. He expresses the same even through his non-fiction "In an Antique Land":

"But I was never able to explain very much of this (riots) to anyone in Nashway. The fact was that despite the occasional storms and turbulence their country had seen, despite even the wars that some of them have fought in, theirs was a world that was far gentler, far less violent, very much more humane and innocent than mine. I could have never expected them to understand an Indian terror of symbols" (92).

Amitav Ghosh's "The Shadow Lines" is one of the most readable and least frivolous of the recent Indian novels in English. Effective fiction emanates from a particular historical moment which intersects the narrator and the nation at a crucial point in their evolution and growth. While capturing the high points of the historical moment in credible and efficient narrative action, the novel eventuates into a search for the vibrant concerns essential for the survival of central strength and sanity in society.

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. By skillfully manipulating the narrator's developing sociological consciousness and his interaction with multicultural representatives in a fictional construct.

In an interview with India Today in April 2000, Amitav Ghosh declared that his early novels, including "The Shadow Lines", are about 'the castaways of history'. Ghosh however creates ambiguity concerning the nature of the so-called 'castaways', especially in their class character and cultural rootlessness. The degree of marginalization

needs to be scrutinized: whether it is Tha'mma forced to stay away from Dhaka, or the mechanic Saifuddin, being uprooted from Motihari. Saifuddin is doubly marginalized - firstly, as an uprooted Muslim compelled to migrate to East Pakistan; and secondly, a non-Bengali Mohajir' who, in the charged context of 1964, was at the receiving end of the cultural and linguistic nationalism spearheaded by the Bengalis in East Pakistan. A classic example of this problematization of exclusive national and cultural identities is the meeting between the Tha'mma and her senile uncle when she visits her ancestral residence in Dhaka in 1964. The incident which begins as a mere domestic gathering eventually snowballs into a showdown between different ideologies working at cross purposes.

The "Two-Nation Theory" fails hopelessly in this context since religious commonality is overcome by linguistic affinity as evident in the Khalil-Saifuddin showdown. Khalil's allegation that Saifuddin intends to capture the whole house has a very serious political sub-text: it echoes the fear psychosis generated among the Bengali populace of East Pakistan owing to the dominance of Urdu- Speaking West Pakistanis in all spheres of their life. "The Shadow Lines" is a metaphor for evading rather than exploring political realities. This may be attributed to the absence of any cogent analysis of the political realities responsible for the streak of violence in the text. Ghosh can be defended against his charge on two grounds: First, he is a creative writer and not a chronicler, hence it is not his job to give an account of historical facts. Second, and more importantly, he seems to work out the Jamesian concept of 'the political unconscious' whose covert presence is to be exposed by the readers themselves.

This search for invisible links ranging across the realities of nationality, the cultural segregation and racial discrimination is the central theme of "The Shadow Lines". The narrator's psyche absorbs cross-cultural interactions and sheds particularity on his origin and the narrow nationalism fostered and instilled in him by his grandmother.

Ghosh has been a student of social anthropology, and his narrator is a student of history. Hence it is implausible that both Ghosh and his narrator are unaware of the context of the sub-continent which contributed to the "Two Nation theory". In Bengal during the 1930s and 1940s, a lop-sided agrarian structure and the raw deal meted out to the peasants and the working class (most of whom, incidentally, were Muslims) gave impetus to the separatist ideology of different communities, leading to the eventual partition. The same logic holds in the struggle for Bangladesh when the aggrieved Bengali populace in East Pakistan revolted against the atrocities and exploitation perpetrated by the Urdu-speaking West Pakistani tyrants. Amitav Ghosh's generalization of riots and violence deliberately avoids harsh political and historical realities. He overlooks the quintessential argument that religious and cultural separatism became secondary when confronted with serious socio-economic threats. Ghosh leaves it to his discerning readers to read between the lines and reinvent history, which in Foucauldian terms, is not linear but disjunctive, bound together by successive power structures. The novel gains stature by placing the individual themes starkly in a contemporary context. The shadow lines divide and link peoples and nations. The novel takes place largely on the newly-created Indo-Pakistan border which divides the family and its past. What is this border? Flying over it, the grandmother expects to see some signs. The father laughs-no, it will not be a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other. But the grandmother's question is a serious one. If there are no physical signs, where is the difference? Why cannot people as in the past travel from Dhaka to Calcutta without anyone stopping them? What are the 'shadow lines'?

There are no absolutist readings to "The Shadow Lines", the text is full of gaps, fissures rifts that mark the sites of personal and national trauma. They are not contingent or accidental but are entry points to probe and interrogate the alternative narratives hidden in the sub-text. Such an intensely political and theoretical grounding can form a suitable entry point to a seemingly political narrative of Amitav Ghosh's. "The Shadow Lines"- a text which is international in scope but very local in spirit. Ghosh's work to date extends the scope of the novel, not only within its narrative but moving outward and beyond the strategies of words, to an exploration of the past and the future of the culture he has inherited.

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