

**BORDERS, VIOLENCE AND IDENTITY: A STUDY OF AMITAV
GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES***

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Abstract

The present deals with the issues of violence and disharmony arising due to geographical divisions as portrayed in the novel *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh. *The Shadow Lines* questions the efficacy and sanity of the lines drawn as borders as the author calls them 'shadow lines'. These lines are a source of perpetual struggle and terrifying violence as the riots breakout on both sides of the border irrespective of national territories as a result of the same incident. Despite the orgy of violence, bloodshed and merciless killing, these riots have a transient existence. The narrator is at a loss to know that his friend Malik does not remember anything about the riots that took place in Calcutta and Dhaka almost the same time in which many people were killed including his role model Tridib and neither do the newspaper carry any significant report on it or attach much importance to it. Ghosh probes deeply into the nature and validity of communal riots and consequent violence that play havoc in the social life of people.

Borders, Violence and Identity: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

Amitav Ghosh is a towering figure of contemporary Indian-English fiction with penetrating insight and creative genius to diagnose and resolve the problems of wide national interest. His novels deal with a large variety of national problems such as social, political and cultural which tend to undermine the very integrity or identity of India as a nation. As ours is a multi-race, multi-caste, multi-religion, multi-lingual country, enormous atrocities have been perpetuated in our country in the name of religion and region, culture and convention. The carnage that preceded and followed the partition of the country still haunts us. Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* depicts the horrors of violence and death during the partition days between the Hindus and the Muslims with a plea to find an agreeable solution to such a sensitive issue. *The Shadow Lines* underlines the challenge of cultural dislocations, ambiguous citizenship, and highlights the nature and validity of communal and religious riots which are the harbingers of destruction, disorder, and disruptions in the normal order of social life.

Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* critically investigates the role of such separatist forces like communalism, nationalism and religion which contributed, by terms or collectively, in the partition of India. It is understandable in view of the fact that all the historical and social events that led to the catastrophe of 1947 and further partition of Bangladesh are the outcome of social, communal and religious obligations. Amitav Ghosh also focuses on the hatred and animosity caused by the communal disturbances during partition in our country. “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 has not even begun” (Bhatt 19). Ghosh also interrogates the fiery emergence of increasing city states everywhere and their demarcation and delineation on the maps and the nationalist ideologies in post-colonial times. He questions the authenticity of these borders as they are a source of perpetual and terrifying violence instead of maintaining law, order and social harmony. Nationalism has been painted in black in the wake of globalization in *The Shadow Lines*. It is held responsible though indirectly for division and separation.

The Shadow Lines also questions the reliability of official and nationalist historiography by highlighting the fictions that people create in their lives recording the lively and memorable experiences of individual memories that do not correspond necessarily with the documented version of history. “Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* is an attempt to give voice to the stony silence and exhume the unclaimed corpses in the catacombs of unhistorical historiography” (Cuddon 1998). It is only as an adult historian that the unnamed narrator in the novel is able to integrate fragments of his memory into a composite whole. He records his memory lane for the reader “sitting in the air-conditioned calm of an exclusive library” (TSL224), and he begins his strangest journey: “a voyage into a land outside space, an expanse without distance; a land of looking glass events” (TSL224). In other words, Ghosh seeks to uncover the hidden and latent aspects of the eras of the division of 1947 and the communal riots of 1964 which are repressed into the political unconsciousness of the people of Indian sub-continent. He remains engaged with his cultural and historical past throughout the novel by rejecting the process of historicizing the imperial past in favour of personal memory and imagination.

The Shadow Lines narrates the story of three generations of the unnamed narrator’s family, spread over Dhaka, Calcutta and London. The story moves around Tridib, who is taken to England by his parents, at the age of eight, and then in 1964 when he becomes a victim of communal frenzy in Dhaka. As the opening sentence indicates, the beginning of the narrative takes place thirteen years before the narrator’s birth, “in 1939, thirteen years before I (narrator) was born” (Bhatt 19), and thus the knowledge of the ravages of the Second World War comes to him through Tridib’s recapitulations. The narrator is in the habit of idealizing Tridib as his hero and superimposes his personality over him. Both Tridib and narrator are extraordinary men with magnificent memory and dominant imagination. Tridib shows him places on the Atlas and tells stories about them, about faraway places in Central America, Africa, England and Sri Lanka. The narrator’s vision has broadened to include all these places even before he has moved out of Calcutta. “Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and eyes to see them with” (TSL20). He can imagine very precisely sloping walls of Sri Lankan houses, which differ from theirs. Tridib’s stories and anecdotes about India, England and far away places serve food for thought for the young narrator and he follows Tridib’s footprints to create a new world for him as it existed and will exist for him. His visit to London for collecting material for his Ph.D thesis, years after

Tridib's death, is nothing but the reliving of Tridib's experiences and fulfillment of the visions that he has had in Calcutta with him. Thus, before Tridib leaves the narrator forever, he has learnt the things taught by Tridib so well that they become corner stone of his mind and whenever he needs any information or recollect the past he just has to strain his brain and things will get going for him.

Thus, Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* denounces nationalism, communalism which, according to him, are responsible for chaos and disorder in society. He blames all these notorious forces for the death of Tridib, Jethamoshai, and Khalil. The frantic mob in Dhaka kills all of these three not out of any personal grudge or enmity but because of their nationalist and communalist passions for they do not belong to their community and nation. Amitav Ghosh deeply explores these cultural, religious and national differences created by partition between Indian and Pakistan and claims that partition is not a solution. It may, on the other, hand trigger never ending hostilities and violence:

The borders that were brutally carved by the authorities at the time of Partition have led to further brutality in the form of those riots, pogroms, and organized historical disturbances and cultural depletions with which the history of independent India is replete. (Ramatha 2001)

The narrator's grandmother, Tha'mma, is a steadfast nationalist who is wholly committed to the nationalist ideal of independent India. She tells the narrator that she would have even killed for her country's freedom which for her is equal to her personal freedom. She deeply loves her birth place Dhaka (East Pakistan), and the partitioned India and the line drawn between Calcutta, her present place of stay and Dhaka does not make any sense to her. But the merciless killing of her nephew Tridib changes her perception and she develops a great hatred for Pakistanis. She now wants a clear demarcation between the two countries. She develops a great aversion for the inhabitants of the other side of the border. Tha'mma also suffers from the agony of partition at more personal level because her divided ancestral house in Dhaka is represented as an allegory for partition, divided fiercely between two brothers. In 1965, one and a half year after her arrival from Dhaka, the Indo-Pak war starts and she gifts away her only gold-chain to the war funds.

Tha'mma associates images of flesh and blood with the nation, perceiving it as a living body. She wants her grand son to become a good second generation Indian citizen, with a strong body, because without a strong body you do not have a strong country.

The grandmother's sense of freedom and nationhood are ambiguous. She cannot understand why Ila, Tridib's niece, wants to live in a country to which she doesn't belong; it must be because of the material comforts. The narrator loves Ila and he explains to his grandmother that it is because Ila wants to be free of the cultural constraints her country imposes upon women, a problem highlighted by the incident when Robi misbehaves with her at the night club in Calcutta. Ila, Robi, and the Narrator go to a posh Calcutta night club, where much against Robi's wishes, Ila asks a stranger to dance with her. At that point, Robi interferes and makes them all leave the night club. His explanation is that women cannot do that in India. So Ila runs off crying that all she wants is to be "free of your bloody culture and free all of you" (TSL89). But Tha'mma disapproves of Ila going away from India to England to which country she does not belong. She articulates an ambiguous understanding of the central role of violence in the making of nations when she talks about the creation of England:

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Ila has no right to live there, she said hoarsely. She doesn't belong there. It took those people a long time to build that country; hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed. Every one who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood: with their brother's blood and their father's blood and their son's blood. They know they are a nation because they have drawn their borders with blood... War is their religion. That is 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. (TSL77-78)

But the nation, as confirmed by the partition of Indian subcontinent, is provided with more threat because the war that leads to its construction brings destruction to the two parties involved. It does not bind Muslims to Hindus or Bengali to Kashmiris but rather sundered Bengali from Bengali, Kashmiri from Kashmiri. Such an unsymmetrical war divides these racial groups into Hindu and Muslims who are required to pacify their cultural, linguistic, and social unities at the cost of national unity and integrity.

Thus, in addition to nationalism, communalism is also equally at fault for antagonism and antipathy between two or more than two religious and cultural groups. As Mohan Jha puts it, "Communalism is the very negation of the valued principles of tolerance, accommodation and co-operation; by its very nature it is a kind of political and religio-cultural reaction that weakens the existing social order, and though at times it may be looked upon as a movement, it is, in fact, neither revolution nor reconstruction" (Cawasjee 17). Communalism derives its force out of such operative religious differences as cultural, social, linguistic and regional conflicts in the act of dominance over other community. "Whenever and wherever one community seeks political or social dominance over other communities by way of religious, cultural, ethnic, regional or linguistic separateness and exploitation, communalism necessarily creeps in" (Mukherjee 267). The same can be applied to the division and mutilation of Indian subcontinent because it was necessarily the outcome of religious, cultural and linguistic differences among Indian population that engulfed the lives of millions of people. However, despite the orgy of violence and death, there are also instances people exhibiting an invisible divinity that holds together people independent of cast, culture and religion. The narrator of Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* observes:

As always, there were innumerable cases of Muslims in East Pakistan giving shelter to Hindu, often at the cost of their own lives, and equally in India, of Hindus sheltering Muslims. (TSL229-30)

But these were the ordinary people who were soon forgotten without any memorable recognizance, and the flames of religious and communal hatred continued to blow through the subcontinent. "Since these two nations were founded on the ineradicable idea of religious difference, the religious agendas of fundamentalist groups now rule over the Indian subcontinent" (Srivastava 105).

Moreover, this gap between religions and communities caused by the fractured lines of nationalist and religious identity is further widened by nationalist historiography that deliberately overlooks individual narratives that relates incidents of communal peace and harmony. "Each time the story of partition is related in the Indian context in order to demonstrate the reprehensibility of the Muslim League and negate the damaging role played by religious zealot within the Indian National Congress, the 'official' account of the partition worsens religious and social divisions" (Khan 44). But Tridib in *The Shadow Lines* is always at pains to rediscover his

own stories because he thinks that if “you do not invent stories of your own, of the places and incident being lived and experienced, you will have to live in others invention of them” (TSL18). As he tells the narrator, stories are all to live in, for if we do not invent stories for ourselves we will have to live in other’s invention of them. “We would never be free of other people’s invention of them” (TSL17). He is conscious of the immeasurable intensity of the human mind that requires the individual to follow an endless and infinite search for the knowledge that would break religious narratives and conceptions cultivated by nationalism. At the same time, Tridib also cannot avoid his awareness of “the seductive clarity of ignorance; an illusion of knowledge created by deceptive weight of remembered details” (TSL67). While in London, he contemplates the anticipated repercussions of the Second World War and the doom of Mrs. Prince’s brother, Alan, and his three friends. He realizes that this blissful ignorance enables one to avoid the starkest of realities, the reality of death that he perceives not in London, but during the 1964 Hindu-Muslim riots in India and East Pakistan.

Almost all the characters are, therefore, caught in the vortex of murderous rampages through various times. The narrator suffers in the riot of 1964 in Calcutta; Robi, Mayadebi, Tridib, May and Tha’mma are trapped in the mob violence of Dhaka; and Tridib and Mayadebi witness London during the days of the Second World War in 1939. Robi cannot get over the trauma of Tridib’s death even 17 years after and it still continues to haunt him everywhere, any casual remark about the place where Tridib died immediately brings to his mind the horrible memories of that day and shakes him like a leaf. The same kind of experience is shared by almost every member of the family. May is burdened with the guilt that she has been responsible for Tridib’s death as it was she who stepped out of the car and thus provoked Tridib to go near the mob. She does not find solace anywhere except after twisting the nature of Tridib’s death to give it the name of a mysterious sacrifice. Thus, even though the places are different being Calcutta, Dhaka, and London, human beings suffer equally at the hands of violence and death. Through the sufferings and the miseries of his characters, Amitav Ghosh has successfully portrayed the suffering humanity.

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