



Dilemma of Crossing Borders and Nationalism as Projected in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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ABSTRACT

In this research paper, I have tried to draw that Amitav Ghosh emphasizes on bringing out the futility of drawing lines across a nation to form two nations. His novels are concerned with the theme of crossing of frontiers- especially those of nationality, culture and language.

With reference to the topic selected here Amitav Ghosh questions the validity of geographical boundaries and celebrates the union of aliens pulled together by self-propelling empathy and attachment. Amitav Ghosh aims to drive home the meaning of nationalism in the minds of the readers, through the characters in the novel. The narrator's grandmother thinks nationalism, a holy and sacred word which has become the focus of political thinking in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

The use of history and politics in the work of art is familiar territory for Amitav Ghosh. As a writer, he has been immensely influenced by the social and political milieu of the country. Also, the stories and events he heard from his parents during his childhood made an indelible impression on his mind. The image of changing India, politically and socially, cast a deep shadow on his mind, is drawn out and discussed here.

KEYWORDS : Women, Empowerment, Political, Democracy, Reservation

Problem that is Justified:-

Like Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, *The Shadow Lines* examines the impact of borders on the personal lines, long after partition and establishes Amitav Ghosh as a major voice after Salman Rushdie. Ghosh introduces a complex web of interrelated images to achieve an artistic integration between his vision and the lives of people he traces. He has added his own long-standing preoccupation with ancient histories, with the close links between civilizations and the constant exchange that seemed to take place almost effortlessly across different cultures, with the coming of statehood and the drawing of borders, with the turning of people into refugees, with the making of nations, and indeed, running through all of this, with the narrative form itself and its varied and various uses in his work.

What is really new is that in his *Shadow Lines*. Ghosh offers not only a conjugation of the personal and the national, setting the personal conflict against the backdrop of national turmoil, but very often he deals with other people's memories of times and places the narrator has never known. Silvia Albertazzi of the University of Bologna in her lucid essay, 'Crossing The Shadow lines', shows that "The Metaphor of The Shadow Lines in Amitav Ghosh's novel, the lines dividing peoples and countries have always existed and that these invisible borders are-and have always been- 'shadowy', illusory', often born out of "different strands of nationalism and ideology" which can be potential and often disrupting sources of violence. It's no more a matter of a single 'shadow line': there are innumerable borders which divide people from others and from themselves, borders separating the colonizer and colonized in the past and 'us' from 'them' in the present; border changing continuously, as the perspective from which we look at them changes."¹ Silvia Albertazzi.

A Brief Introduction to Mr. Amitav Ghosh:-

As a writer, Amitav Ghosh has been immensely influenced by the social and political milieu of the country. Also, the stories and events he heard from his parents during his childhood made an indelible impression on his mind. The image of changing India, politically and socially, cast a deep shadow on Ghosh's mind. Born in Calcutta in 1956, Ghosh graduated from St. Stephens College, Delhi. He belongs to the group of post-independence writers and made a conscious effort at carving out his own niche- with a new trust in theme, structure, language and his approach to the entire genre of fiction. For a short period during the Emergency, he worked with *The Indian Express*. Later he joined Delhi School of Economics as a lecturer in the Department of Anthropology.

Trained as an anthropologist at Oxford and writer by profession, Ghosh wrote his first book *The Circle of Reason* (1986) that wandered through India, Persia, Gulf, Egypt and Algeria. It is skillfully constructed novel with the folk tale charm of *Arabian Nights*. It marks a break

from the traditional themes of Indian English novel and the form and structure of the well-made novel. The all-embracing structural principles of magic and irony eloquently 'weave' the total pattern of the novel and ideas, characters and metaphors are explicated through attendant motifs. The novel abounds in weird happenings.

Projection of Nationalism in the Novel *The Shadow Lines*:-

For an understanding of the novel's stance vis-à-vis nationalism one has to begin by analyzing Tham'ma's concept of nationalism. What constitutes Tham'ma's nationalism? Hutchinson and Smith observe:

"Nationalism was first of all, a doctrine of popular freedom and sovereignty. The people must be liberated- that is, is freed from any external constraints; they must determine their own destiny and be masters in their own house; they must control their own resources; they must obey only their 'inner' voice. But that entailed fraternity. The people must be united; they must dissolve all internal divisions; they must be gathered in a single historic territory, a homeland; and they must have legal equality and share a single public culture."²

In the novel, the exemplar of nationalism is Tham'ma who lived and experienced the setbacks and successes. Born in Dhaka, separated from her birth-place by a history of bloodshed and shifting boundaries on the map, Tham'ma often dreams of her home. In her confusion, rather than say that she would 'go home to Dhaka', she says that she would "come home to Dhaka." (SL,p.155) The grandmother is a displaced person and had to leave her ancestral home, Dhaka and settle in Calcutta.

The Problem that is Aroused Justified: A Review :-

The barriers of nation, country and time dissolve in the consciousness of the author and he reaches a tragic realization of how unscrupulous political forces continue to suffocate human aspirations.

Tham'ma was born and brought up in Dhaka but came to Calcutta long before partition. Unlike so many of their brethren they did not have to feel the pang of being uprooted and to face the daunting task of rebuilding lives from the debris of history. To them 'refugee' was a term of abuse. But though they did not suffer materially, their emotional wound took a long time to heal and left a deep scar.

It is again the narrator's grandmother who raises a pertinent question about borders between nations. She wonders aloud, how people are to know where the border between Pakistan and India lies, if there are no trenches to mark it: "I mean, where's the difference, then?" She asks her son, "and if there's no difference, both sides will be the same; it will be just like it used to be before, when we use 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 the killing and everything- if

there isn't something in between?" (SL,p. 151)

Years later, after her death, her grandson revises her idea of lines, maps and borders, coming to the conclusion that one cannot separate two countries so simply as by drawing a line on a map.

"I was struck with wonder that there had really been a time, not so long ago, when people, sensible people, of good intension, had thought that all maps were the same, that there was a special enchantment in lines. [...]"

They had drawn their borders, believing in that pattern, in the enchantment of lines, hoping perhaps that once they had etched their borders upon the map the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of the prehistoric Gondwanaland.

Ghosh focuses on the meaning and shades of political nuances in contemporary life. The universal urge for political freedom, the response to violence and strident nationalism are some important aspects of contemporary life in the subcontinents, stressed in his discussion. *The Shadow Lines* takes the reader into the consciousness of several characters particularly the narrator's grandmother, Ila's parents and May Price. Each consciousness emerges in light and shade, etched with its own individual quirks.

The author questions the validity of geographical boundaries and celebrates the union of aliens pulled together by self-propelling empathy and attachment. Amitav Ghosh aims to drive home the meaning of nationalism in the minds of the readers, through the characters in the novel. The narrator's grandmother thinks nationalism, a holy and sacred word which has become the focus of political thinking in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Howard Wolf analyses:

"...the field of experience beyond one's immediate boundaries both past and future- becomes a more demanding standard by which the self discovers and tests itself. In looking inward or outward, the autobiographical writer finds traces of its opposite: self yields history, history yields self. In either case, the writer is tested: (1) in discovering history in the self, the writer's conscience is tested, for he must now judge his actions by a scale than his own: (2) by discovering self in history, the autographical writer must face the impersonality of his experiences, wound to the ego."³

The Shadow Lines, upholds the imperative that ensures empathy and unimpeded flow of friendship. It mocks the conception of militant nationalism, exclusive national pride and identity. The outbreak of communal strife in Dhaka following the disappearance of the prophets' hair in Srinagar exposes the fragile demarcation of political frontiers. Tham'ma's ideas of nationalism, nurtured since the Swadeshi movement, do not stand the test of time. The author shows that her misplaced sense of pride and drawing national borders with blood are likely to be undone by the inherent logic of separateness. The narrator says on Tham'ma's reaction on borderline:

"For instance, one evening when we were sitting out in the garden she wanted to know whether she would be able to see the borer between India and East Pakistan from the plane. When my father laughed and said, why did she really think the border was a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other, like it was in school atlas, she was not so much offended as puzzled." (SL,p.,151). Amitav Ghosh brings out the pathos of a lost dream. The grandmother has an idea of real space- a space she thinks she belongs to, but in Dhaka when she looks for her determined space- culturally and linguistically- she finds it no longer there. Tham'ma leaves for Dhaka on 2nd January 1964, thinking about the emptiness and pains of life caused by boundaries. With the excitement of visiting her own home, the first thing she said to Mayadebi at the airport was: "Where's Dhaka? I can't see Dhaka" (SL,p.193). The Dhaka in which she lived is only a piece of memory. She is completely unprepared to accept the change. May, unaware of the past, is happy with the sight of Dhaka and says: "What a pretty road, its so much more open than Calcutta." But as for my grandmother, she kept on saying: I've never seen any of this. Where's Dhaka? (SL,p.194). The grandmother looks for Kana-babu's sweet shop and lanes. She exclaims: "It can't be our lane for where's Kana babu's sweet shop? That shop over there selling ham-

mers and hardware? Where's the sweet shop gone? (SL,p.206) She finds the new hotels, race courses and the cinema hall, all wonderful, but she still questions, where's Dhaka?

The Shadow Lines appears to be quest novel-a contemporary consciousness in search of self-knowledge and self-identity. The novel is written in the first person; but even to the very end we are never told his name. He is an individual, rooted and well defined, but as the novel progresses, he seems to transcend himself and becomes identified with a depersonalized contemporary consciousness.

At the personal level, the metaphor of the shadow lines is seen in the attempted cross-cultural relationships between Ila and Nick and May Price and Tridib. Ila's love for Nick is a childhood fantasy. Even as a child she hides the callousness and timidity of Nick Price and instead glorifies him as coming to her rescue, when she was being beaten by a school-mate on her way home. In reality Nick had run away from the scene of action for fear of being seen with a non-native. Ila however persists with her illusion and propagates this view to everybody that she meets. Ila's glorification of Nick, when in actuality he was trying to avoid her shows the shadow lines that exist between recorded history is a process of selection, rejection and invention. Even when she grows up, Ila persists with her illusion and does not hesitate to marry Nick, despite his known inconsistency and waywardness.

The divisive shadow lines are apparent after Ila marries Nick Price. She had hoped by her marriage to gain an identity for herself in England and become part of the mainstream. However much to her consternation she finds that her husband deceives her for the sake of "a bit of variety." (SL,p. 188). So her marriage to the adulterous Nick has caused her only humiliation and pain and not the desired assimilation to the English mainstream. At this stage, she is unable to deal with the situation despite her progressive views, independent spirit and western outlook to life. She is unable to confront Nick about his betrayal and is not willing to leave him. Nick's betrayal makes Ila realize that there is a mental crossing over involved in the process of adoption of a new home for a self-imposed exile like her. Her search for freedom and identity in the western world proves to be elusive. She does not understand that social institutions like marriage have broken down in the western world and so the freedom she wanted required a sacrifice of certain principles and imbibed value systems, like sanctity of man-woman relations after marriage.

So Ila has to struggle to overcome divisive shadow lines in her voluntary state of exile. Mere physical relocation is not enough. As Alpana Neogy in her thoughtful essay, "Two Exiles and One at Home" says, "A change of perspective, perhaps a shadow of a line needs to be traversed in order to make "home" out of a state of exile."

In contrast, the narrator's mother suffers from no divisive shadow lines. She ensures serenity in her household and is content being a housewife, caring for her husband, mother-in-law and son. Relatives and the welfare of the family are the focal point in her life. She makes sure that there is the correct atmosphere in the house, when her husband returns home from work. She lives by conventions and her homeland is where her families. There are no nagging doubts, nostalgia for the past or yearning for social freedom in her mind.

The metaphor of the shadow lines is also evident in the relationship between May and Tridib also. When Tridib writes a long letter to May he suggests that he would like to meet her- "as a stranger in a ruin.... In a place without a past, without history, free, really free, two people coming together, with the utter freedom of strangers." (SL,p.144). It implies that he wants to meet May, without the burden of history, without any expectations or pre-conditions or any divisive shadow lines. May initially thinks that such a letter is an intrusion of her privacy but then succumbs to curiosity and decides to visit India and meet Tridib. Initially May decides to visit Delhi and Agra as a tourist and then go to Calcutta, so that Tridib would be confronted by a beggar-woman with a mangled hand, May gets frightened and locks herself in her hotel room. The shadow lines in her mind return and doubts creep in about why she came to India. But when she met Tridib, the doubts vanished. As she told the narrator years later, "He looked awkward, absurdly young, and somehow very reassuring. Also a little funny, because his eyes were hugely magnified by those glasses of his and he kept blinking in an embarrassed kind of way." (SL,p.

167).

Summing up:-

After discussing a lot, there comes out a conclusion that Amitav Ghosh is a writer of crossing borders. His novel *The Shadow Lines* is a full pack of the discussing the scenes across the borders. The imagery line of border that divide the two nations is merely like a shadow line. Many people have faced personal dilemma due to this imagery shadow line that is spotted on maps. Whenever any such line is formed or fixed, the traumatic situation is formed in the minds of the natives around. They suffer a great dilemma when such new line is created. In this research paper I, have just tried to find out the situations and scenes that are projected in the novel *The Shadow Lines* that show the hard situations along with nationalism are faced.

Abbreviations Used:- SL - The Shadow Lines

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