



The Shadow Lines : A Critique on Nationalism and Borders

Raesabegam
Usmani

Research scholar, Department of Biotechnology, Veer Narmad South
Gujarat University, Surat, India.

ABSTRACT

There are many possible readings of The Shadow Lines. One of the ways of reading The Shadow Lines is as a narrative about the Partition of the subcontinent and its aftermath, as it unleashes the enduring inheritance of the partition. The narrative unleashes the mindless mob and the powerful catastrophic vigor as religious fundamentalism. It also questions the geo-political and socio-political Shadow Lines which separates people and nations, whether it has any authenticity by itself or whether it is a meaningless misapprehension. It also seems to question the established narrative of the Indian subcontinent and tries to regain the part of its lost history – a riot in 1964 sunk in muffle. In a way, it is a critique on the burning issues like 'borders' and 'nationalism.'

KEYWORDS : catastrophic, muffle, critique, subcontinent, fundamentalism

The Shadow Lines won the Sahitya Academy Award in 1989¹. There are many possible readings of *The Shadow Lines*. One of the ways of reading *The Shadow Lines* is as a narrative about the Partition of the subcontinent and its aftermath, as it unleashes the enduring inheritance of the partition. The narrative unleashes the mindless mob and the powerful catastrophic vigor as religious fundamentalism. It also questions the geo-political and socio-political Shadow Lines which separates people and nations, whether it has any authenticity by itself or whether it is a meaningless misapprehension. It also seems to question the established narrative of the Indian subcontinent and tries to regain the part of its lost history – a riot in 1964 sunk in muffle. Although the novel represents 'the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory of such riot against forgetting' as Milan Kundra observes in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*.²

The narrative travels across three continents. It mused three chunks of time – London, during the second World War, Calcutta and Dhaka in the 1960s and 1970s and then again London of the 1980s. In addition it takes into consideration three phases of protagonist's life: childhood, adolescence and young adulthood. It also describes the protagonist's uncle Tridib's life from 1940s to 1960s.

A tragic incident of a riot in Dhaka occurs in January 1964, in which Jethamosai, Tridib and Khalil were killed, was just a particular loss to the protagonist, ultimately proves pathetic spin-off of the happenings occurred previous week in the subcontinent. The historic information of the stolen Mui-Mubarak, a sacred relic, on 27th December, 1963 in Srinagar, retrieved later, is given almost at the end of the narrative. But suddenly table turns when Kashmir celebrates the regaining of the relic, riots burst out in Khulna and Dhaka very distant places of East Pakistan and later on in Calcutta in India. This is the way Ghosh describes how one occurrence in Srinagar set of the sequence of occurrences of communal violence in far off portions of the subcontinent.

Tridib is pin-up for protagonist, whom he idealize and "with whose life he is preoccupied to the point of obsession", who, as he keeps saying "had given me worlds to travel in and eyes to see them with".³ Thus, Tridib's death leaves a void in the protagonist's life. The protagonist's search behind the truth of Tridib's death actually establishes the base of the narrative. Eventually the truth unveiled to the protagonist in bits and pieces over an epoch of seventeen years. Many circuitous statements all through the narrative lead towards the factual declaration:

When I got there I saw three bodies. They were all dead. They'd cut Khalil's stomach open. The old man's head had been hacked off. And they'd cut Tridib's throat from ear to ear. ⁴ (p. 251)

Tridib's death in the Dhaka Violence raises many affairs in the narrative, specifically the issue of the post 1947, political reality of the Indian subcontinent. The division of the two states India and Pakistan on the basis of religion, in actual fact inflames the communal violence in

both newly created states. It questions the very existence of a rational nationalism in these parts of the subcontinent.⁵ Indeed it must be admitted that nationalism is such a wide-ranging notion, which cannot be defined in one perspective, when even political theorists have interpreted it in from varying perspectives.⁶

Two different versions of nationalism can be tracked down in *The Shadow Lines*. First Thamma's belief in the 'militant nationalism' during the first half of the twentieth century and later the narrator's concept of nationalism, he pronounces as the narrative progress. Thamma in the novel, as observes by Suvir Kaul: "is the exemplar of militant nationalism (...) who had lived the nationalist dream and experienced the setbacks and successes that gave it its character".⁷ Believing to an opinion of freedom formed in the crucible of violent anti-colonial contention, Thamma, as clearly narrated in the narrative "sees national identities not in terms of imagined communities, but as a deeply rooted connectedness to a place born out of the blood sacrifices of generations."⁸

In 1965, during the Indo-China war when she gave her last morsel of jewelry in war funds, her grandson asks the reason and she emphatically clear her motive:

I gave it to the funds of 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 (...) We are fighting them properly at last, with tanks and guns and bombs'. (p.11)

Thamma's frenzied reaction proves that she is intensely immersed in the nationalist oratory and that proves Anjali Gera's observation that "till the end, she remains imprisoned in the myth of the nation"⁹ Thamma's beliefs nationalism as a source of violence, which was denied by Ghosh as he puts ahead a unique notion of nationalism through the protagonist, is that it should be reformulate in the current global context. Ghosh's narrative questions whether nations can be geo-politically formulated at all. He describes in *The Shadow Lines* that the borders which separates nations are shadowy, arbitrary and illusive. The incident of the death of Tridib in the narrative affirms this fact.

While denouncing the mystery of these communal belligerences, which affected distant places very quickly, of two parted states, Tridib's old copy of Bartholomew's Atlas enlightens him. When he draws a circle of 1200 miles, first in the Asia's map and then in the Europe's map, he locates the first circle as a 'remarkable' one as 'more than half of mankind seemed to have fallen within it' (p. 232). But relevantly the first circle around Asia uncovers the paradox of geographical closeness and poles apart disputes of national identity. While approaching near the end of the narrative, Ghosh emphasizes Tridib's aspiration of the universe where the borders associate people and proves illusionary and absurd, negating its very existence, as the narrator says:

I was struck with wonder that there had really been a time, not so long ago, when people, sensible people, of good intentions, had thought that all maps were the same (...).

They had drawn their borders,... 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 ancient Gondwanaland. (...) when they discover that they had created not a separation, but a yet-undiscovered irony (...) the simple fact that there had never been a moment in the four-thousand-year-old history of that map when the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines. (p. 233)

Different perceptions on borders and nationhood are represented by three characters, belongs to three different era's descendents. Thamma, grandmother, while flying to Bangladesh startles when she could not find the physical existence of the border from the plan and says:

But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean where's the difference then? And if there's no difference, both sides will be the same. (...) What was it all for then – partition and all the killing and everything – if there isn't something in between? (P.151)

Whereas Jethamosai, Thamma's uncle, perceives the Partition and borders in a very distinct and stimulating manner as observed by Suvir Kaul 'like another more-than-sane literary character, Manto's Toba Tek Singh'¹⁰ while refusing to leave Dhaka and declares:

I know everything, I understand everything. Once you start moving you never stop ... I said: I don't believe in this India-Shindia. It is all very well, you are going away now, but suppose when you get here they decide to draw another line somewhere? No one will have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I will die here. (p. 215)

Robi, Thamma's nephew, reiterates Jthamosai's conception of nationalism and borders after fifteen years, as a well acquainted of all the communal conflict on the subcontinent as an Indian Administrative Service Officer. He mulls over the word 'freedom' as it is the origin of all tribulations:

Free, he said laughing. You know, if you look at the pictures on the front pages of newspapers at home now, all those pictures of dead people – in Assam, the north east, Punjab, Sri Lanka, Tripura (...) everyone's doing it to be free (...). I think to myself why don't they draw thousands of little place a new name? What would it change? It's a mirage; the whole thing is a mirage. How can anyone divide a memory? (pp. 246-247)

Jethamosai doesn't believe in the illusory borders as he belongs to the era when the belongingness to his native place is of more importance for him. He understands well that there would be no full stop when a man started moving. Thamma on the other hand, grew up in the era of freedom movement against Britishers. This phase had played a major in creating her individual view of self though ironically she couldn't become a part of nationalist movement. Rather differently, Robi, who belongs to the post-partition era, well aware of all the

communal disturbances, perceives freedom as a base of all the problems. Thus, Robi's view seems more philosophical on the issues of nationalism and borders than his predecessors.

It is very fascinating to notice at this point that many readers and critics notices elements of politics in Ghosh's work but he himself publicly disowns taking open political stand as he said in an interview:

I'm not interested in speaking for anyone or creating a kind of political vision which will supplant other political visions. I mean, there are things in politics that I don't like. Obviously I hate these fundamentalists, I hate extreme nationalism (...) but I don't see myself as political. I would go even further and say that I don't see myself as political. I would go even further and say that I don't think it's particularly interesting to write about politics.¹¹

Thus, these three characters are the representatives of the pre-partition, partition and post-partition periods. Ghosh doesn't simply re-invent the 'event' of Partition in *The Shadow Lines* but in fact emphasizes more on the aftermath of the partition as the partition becomes the epicenter of the discovery of massive political notions like 'freedom' and 'nationalism' which also explores the notion of 'borders'. Ghosh laid emphasis on the verity that it is out of the question to survive without sustaining the decedents when eventually the narrator incorporates the previous notions on borders and nationalism.

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