

Cross-cultural Collisions and the Notions of Nationhood in Amitav Ghosh's Novel *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract

Ghosh is a talented, innovative and an experimentalist writer. He has been churning out books after books, be it a work of fiction, travel writing or essays. His books are borne out of a conviction, and ideas run his books. The thought contents in his works are strong, his characters, incidents and the places convey thoughts and feelings that are genuine and true to his own ideals. *The Shadow Lines* is one of the best-known works of Ghosh. The basic idea propounded in this book is the shallowness of international borders, lines of control, frontiers and boundaries. The description of the pain of partition, riots and communal hatred brings home the notion of unreal borders. This book is scrupulously structured around the exploration of possibilities for making the connections across the cultural differences. In the last pages of the book, the sexual encounter between an Indian narrator and the English woman May, becomes a metonym for such possibility.

This paper aims to study such cross-cultural collisions in the book and to investigate the possibilities, if any, of making connections across the cultural differences. It also undertakes to examine the concept and importance of nationhood in cross-cultural confrontations.

Keywords: Borders, Partition, Nation, Nationhood, Cross-cultural differences.

The history of humanity is a history of migrations in which communities were exposed to one another to find larger cross-cultural communities. Ganapathy believes that "If cross-cultural issues receive wide critical attention today, it is because they are at the heart of the crisis of the modern construct of nation as a locus of power provoked largely by the end of empires" (Ganapathy, p. 67).

The Indian novel in English was conceived when India was struggling to overthrow colonial dependency on Britain. This depiction of nationalistic fervour and oneness of identity is perfectly illustrated in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* written in 1938. The village Kanthapura represents a homogenous community where people forget their internal differences of caste, creed and religion and become united against their common foe, the British. It is a typical post-colonial novel where the exploited or colonized are against the colonizer. But after independence

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the tendency of Indian novelists to depict homogenous communities has changed to the depiction of a world beyond the petty boundaries of caste, religion, state and nation. This is exemplified in the fiction of Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh and many other Indian English fiction writers. *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh is an attempt to show the blurring of lines and borders between East and West, between different castes and religious beliefs through an unconventional post-colonial novel which shows the colonized travelling and moving to and from the colonizer's territory. It is best read as a novel that interrogates a political consciousness baptized in the crucible of national divides. This novel is more sombre, less fanciful in its politics, and quite stunning in the power with which its formal experiments in sequence and location resonate thematically. *The Shadow Lines* traces nearly a half-century of interlocking relations among three generations of two families, one Indian and one British, giving perhaps the definitive fictional demonstration of Benedict Anderson's dictum that nation are "imagined communities". It is the story of the family and friends of the nameless narrator, which has its roots in broader national and international experience. In the novel, the past, the present and the future combine and melt together erasing any kind of line of demarcations. The text deals with the concerns of our period, the search for identity, the need for independence, the difficult relationship with colonial culture. *The Shadow Lines* interweaves fact, fiction and reminiscence.

Malathi has noted that "In his novels Amitav Ghosh explores the ideas of nationhood and diasporas, ideas that involve relationships between individuals belonging to the same or to different communities that sometimes transgress and transcend the shadow lines of political borders. *The Shadow Lines* probably represents Ghosh's most direct confrontation with nationalism and national identity and it is simultaneously about each character's personal identity" (Malathi, p. 7). The historical consciousness that the novel carries in its background is a result of several momentous events and an occasional obscure one. It includes the freedom movement in Bengal, the Second World War, the partition of India and the miasma of communal hatred breaking out into riots in East Pakistan (Now Bangladesh) following the Hazratbal shrine incident in Srinagar in 1964. The novel does not depict or present these political and social upheavals in a straightforward manner, rather each of his characters lives through the emotional trauma which is a consequence of these happenings. This traumatic experience is not limited to a particular community or people of one nationality, but it engulfs characters irrespective of their geographical and social place in this world full of man-made divisions.

Amitav Ghosh's novels centre on the cross-cultural and cross-national confrontations of the characters that are in their very nature different from each other. Therefore as a wandering cosmopolitan; he roves round and round and weaves them together with his narrative beauty. In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh makes the East and West meet on a pedestal of friendship, especially through the characters like Tridib, May, Ila, Nick, unnamed narrator, etc. The metaphor of travel as a means of bridging boundaries and bringing about cultural crossings is carried out throughout the entire time span covered by the novel and through

all the variegated characters. The plot of the novel revolves around these two families—the Datta Chaudhuris of Bengal and the Prices of London and the narrator's relationship with them. The lives of these two families are constantly intersecting and intertwining and it's the unnamed narrator who weaves the various threads together. Mrs. Price's father who initiated the long relationship between theirs and the narrator's family lived in India before independence. The narrator's very eccentric uncle Tridib, went to London and lived with the Prices during the war. The narrator, who remains an anonymous 'I' throughout the narrative, is Tridib's alter ego and he also continues this pattern of dwelling in travel. The three persons who play a significant role in the life of the narrator are his uncle Tridib, Ila, and his grandmother. But it's Tridib who exercises the greatest influence on the narrator and helps him evolve into adulthood where he's able to discard all restricting boundaries and is able to invent places in his imagination. The political, regional and linguistic lines become blurred, as the narrator's consciousness and memory become an organizing place, where the lives of three generations of his family are woven together, as are the cities in which their lives have been acted out: Dhaka, Calcutta and London.

The Shadow Lines is an apt revelation of the fragility of partition, borderlines between countries and the cartographical lines which claim to separate people and communities. He gives the metaphor of the looking glass to these borderlines wherein every populace sees its own image reflected in the land on the other side of the border. In Ghosh's conception, borderline is not a division that brings about a fundamental change in the identity of people on either side of the border. The narrator himself speaks about the evolution in his thoughts. He confesses that:

"...he believed in the reality of space. I believed that distance separates, that it is a corporeal substance; I believed in the reality of nations and borders; I believed that across the border there existed another reality. The only relationship my vocabulary permitted between those separate realities was war or friendship." (*The Shadow Lines*, p. 219)

The conceptualization of terms like nation-making, nationalism, nationality and their bearing on identity seem to be in flux rather than fixed, they are processes rather than finished products. This is obvious, as cultural or sociological paradigms are dynamic and unstable; they change, shift and rearrange themselves as a result of multiple factors like politics, religion and language. In the face of such development, against the backdrop of a series of divergent factors mentioned above that continuously change the social milieu, it becomes increasingly difficult to think of the 'nation' in fixed ways. The critique of the nation then, of necessity, must move along the working through process of revisions and redefinitions. However, it is helpful to look at the issue from a cultural perspective, for the novel clearly shows that cultural formations are the sites within which one's nationality or individual identity may be constructed.

The narrator, Tridib and his grandmother—despite their differences in age, location, ideology and varying perspectives on reality, share an innate Indianness,

even a conceptual formulation of nationalism, which Ila, the Indian located in the West cannot envisage. The narrator's grandmother, for instance, is one such character for whom the nation is a clear marker of identity. She is a votary of the nation in a sense in which none of the other character is. In fact, she represents a legitimate view of the nation against which the viewpoints of others like those of Tridib, Ila and the narrator, may be perceived. Though she lives in the frozen past, the reality of nationhood is largely stable in her case. As a fervent and militant nationalist, she worries about her old uncle dying in a country not his own, almost abandoned and alone in old age. She tells her son:

It doesn't matter whether we recognize each other or not. We are the same flesh, the same blood, the same bone and now at last, after all these years, perhaps we'll be able to make amends for all that bitterness and hatred. (*The Shadow Lines*, p. 129)

It is clear that she cares for the ties of blood and nationhood, and is prepared to let go the bitter memories of family feuds. Tha'mma's sense of nation receives a severe jolt when she undertakes a rescue mission to Dhaka to bring back her Jethamoshai to India. Before her departure she wonders whether she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the window of the plane, to which her son sarcastically replies that:

"... did she think that the border would actually be a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other as in a school atlas!" (*The Shadow Lines*, p. 141)

True, her response to the question of the border is naive, but her expectation to find trenches or soldiers or guns pointing at each other or even no-man's land there, makes sense. But when she is told that she should expect clouds, and at the most some green fields, she is simply amazed, and her natural and forthright response is:

"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; it'll be just like it used to be before, when we used 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 all the killing and everything—if there isn't something in between?" (*The Shadow Lines*, p. 151)

As far as the younger generation in the novel is concerned, they have inherited a nation stricken with dissension and disunity. It can flare up at the slightest provocation. And this is exactly what happened when the narrator was a school-going child. There were riots in Calcutta. He and his schoolmates had suddenly felt disoriented in their own land, as the city had turned against them; and they were stupefied with fear. While reflecting upon this experience as an adult he says:

"It is a fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets that one inhabits, can become, suddenly and without warning, as hostile as a flash flood, It is the entire subcontinent that experiences it, and it is this which differentiates it from the

rest of the world—not language, not food, not music. 'It is the special quality of loneliness', he tells us 'that grows out of the war between oneself and one's image in the mirror'" (*The Shadow Lines*, p. 204)

Likewise, Robi suffers the consequences of the nation in disarray, though in a much more poignant way. His elder brother, Tridib, had got killed in a riot in Dhaka, and he happened to be a mute witness to this gory incident. The most poignant section of the text is the account of Tridib's death, given fifteen years after the event for the first time by his brother Robi. Robi has been revisited by the same nightmare for long years and he tells it in a powerful and uneasy mix of dream and unreality:

"If only that dream would go away, I would be like other people; I would be free. I would have given anything to be free of that memory." (*The Shadow Lines*, p. 246)

This heart-rending cry of pain and helplessness should render meaningless, practically, all carefully constructed theories of the nation. The heart of darkness, the centre of the mob towards which Tridib fearlessly walks swallows not just Tridib but all sense of sanity and discretion that makes human beings humane. In the context of the painful death of his brother, Robi muses on the word 'free', and finds it to be a 'mirage'. If freedom were possible through killings, then Tridib's death would have set him free.

The Shadow Lines imbibes the themes of multiculturalism, and nationalism while making use of unique narrative technique based on memory. But the novel stands out for the introduction of Ghosh's favourite concern and a revolutionary one too, of the futility of borders and divisions and emphasis on the need to dissolve these physical boundaries. Only such an effort can obliterate psychological barriers and bring the world closer. The narrative undercuts the view based on the difference between the created regions in the subcontinent by highlighting the similarities between Dhaka and Calcutta: after partition the two cities are seen as "an inverted image of each other" (223). The narrative accomplishes the task of undercutting the ideology of nationalism by questioning the received/official version of history.

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