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A CLOSE STUDY OF AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES*: PROBLEMATIZING THE
CONCEPT OF HOME& NATION

SUBHAM GANGULY

Assistant Professor, Humanities Department (English), Hooghly Engineering & Technology College,
Hooghly, West Bengal, India



SUBHAM GANGULY

ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to capture the nuances inherent in human minds regarding borderlines, nation and nationhood as represented in Amitava Ghosh's iconic novel 'The Shadow Lines'. Partition and its aftermath play a pivotal role in weaving the plot of the novel. Likewise, the article deals with the violence, aspirations, confusions and futility of partition; (re)presenting and interrogating the orthodox opinions about our Home, 'Desh', Boundary and Nation.

Keywords: Borderlines, Nation, Partition, Boundary

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Amitav Ghosh's second novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988), cross-examines the concept of boundary as we usually understand the word. Ghosh's handling of the theme undercuts the received opinions about nation, nationality, home, family and so on. Normally, a kind of homogeneity is imposed on units and institutions like family, religion, nation and the fine differences are swept under the carpet. Ghosh illustrates how cracks appear within the units, thereby putting the unity and credibility of such classifications into interrogation. Pinning down any fixed meaning/definition to any unit appears to be naïve; the ideas of 'sameness' and 'difference' are usually believed as the norms of establishing and distinguishing one unit from the other. These are, therefore, the norms for depicting borders. Ghosh engages the allegory of "shadow lines" to suggest the fickleness and even silliness of the practice of drawing the borderlines. To divide community and cultures into fixity is to deny the potentials of interaction. According to Ghosh culture is not independent and its routes always trace history. In such a way different cultures come across one another to get interconnected and barriers between different cultures get blurred. In the final act of the novel *The Shadow Lines*, such a meeting of two cultures- Indian and British- are exhibited by the sexual encounter and emotional bond between the narrator and Mat Price on the last night of the former's stay in London through which he is granted "the glimpse of a final redemptive mystery" (252). The mystery according to Dixon, is of "lived human experience that transcends the artificial borders of nation and race".¹

The Shadow Lines is basically a novel, which deals with three families spread over three countries across the world viz. Dhaka, Calcutta, and London. The three families narrate their own experiences of cultural, religious and national differences/indifferences along the generations. Written against the milieu of civil strife

in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and riot-hit Calcutta, the novel reveals during its course the various traumas and crisis faced by the immigrants and the left-over natives in East Pakistan. It also tries to show that such communal riots do not have borders; they spread like wildfire and cross territorial borders. Thus a communal riot in Srinagar has its effects in Dhaka and thereby the geographical borders between Dhaka and Srinagar seem to evaporate.

The events in the novel essentially revolve around Maya Devi's family, their friendship with the English friends- the Prices, and Thamma, the narrator's grandmother and Maya Devi's elder sister. The novel deals with the experiences and links with her ancestral city Dhaka. The narration revolves around a number of decades and also covers the riots of 1964 which killed Maya Devi's uncle 'Jethamoshai', Tridip, the central character of the novel, and Khalil, the rickshaw puller. Their deaths seem to shroud the issue of intercultural understanding and friendship in contemporary social structures divided by vague lines called national boundaries. The novel thereby revolves around two families- The Datta- Chaudhuries of Bengal and the Prices in London. And in the cross-transactional attribute between these two families and their generations, Ghosh's novel tries to interrogate the concept of boundary. As A.N.Kaul explains in his essay:

Towards the end the story also crosses the newly created frontier between India and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), engaging or acknowledging along the way the proximate presence of other foreign countries and continents through the Indian diplomatic and UN posting of the Datta- Chaudhuris (300) ²

In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh attempts to display how cultures of different nations intersect one another. There is always some room to find a common space where this intersection takes place. When such a space is forged, the geographical boundaries artificially created by men dissolve at once. An evidence of this artificially created border can be found in the novel. "Thamma" (the narrator's grandmother), a significant character in the novel, is bewildered not to find any obvious signs of demarcation lines or trenches at the Indo-Bangladesh border. She is going to Dhaka from Calcutta to visit her uncle (Jethamoshai) who had all along been refusing to leave his 'home' in Dhaka and to cross over to Calcutta after partition. A common man's expectation about the existence of demarcation lines between two nations is also present in 'thamma'. Nations try to impose all kinds of restrictions like passport, visa, etc. to create a sense of uniqueness of a nation and its difference from others. Such restrictions are basically political in nature and are often the signifiers of deeply embedded animosities towards the 'other'. While going to Dhaka the grandmother flies over the border but fails to see any demarcation lines like the trenches that should have neatly divided the two territories belonging to two countries. As an old-fashioned nationalist she has internalized the philosophy of division on the basis of some principle of differences. Therefore she looks for the external divisionary lines:

...If there aren't any trenches or anything how are people to know? I mean what is the difference then? And if there's no difference both sides will be the same; it will just be like it used to be before (154).

The grandmother thus is very much confused about the non-existence of the border. She at the same time feels, at one with, and alienated from Dhaka. The mere geographical border does not seem to be irrelevant and artificial when she realizes that there is no big difference between living in Calcutta or Dhaka. It's all the same in both the places. Hence the spatial border becomes meaningless, rather baseless. Thus it has been pointed out, "In view of the persistent interfusion of spaces, the titles of the two parts of the book- 'Going Away' and 'Coming Home' becomes ironical because the impression that emerges from Ghosh's handling of experiences is that one can neither 'go away' nor 'come home'."³

The concept of 'home' is absolutely problematized in the text. For Thamma, Dhaka where she was born and brought up, is the 'home'- because she is so emotionally associated with the place. Nevertheless political events and religious differences combined to dislodge her from her birthplace and shifted her to Calcutta where she tried to re-root herself. She is thus confused and disillusioned about the identity of her 'home'. Her disillusionment increases while mentioning her birthplace, which is where she intends to go, but now as she crosses the borders the idea of 'home' indeed becomes problematical. As Anjali Gera argues, the

term 'home' or 'desh' basically denotes the identity of the regional place. The term can further be narrowed down to a much smaller place of belonging if any specific location is demanded.⁴

Like Thamma her uncle, 'Jethamoshai' is also confused about the idea of one's roots or even 'home'. Refusing to go back to Kolkata as because Dhaka is no longer his home or nation, he says:

I don't believe in this India- Shindia it's all very well you are going away now but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? (215)

'Jethamoshai', here speaks of the arbitrariness of drawing the boundary lines. These lines do not exist anywhere. They are 'decided' and imposed. The speaker questions the wisdom of such imposition- in fact he refuses to accept the arbitrarily drawn demarcation lines. To him, home is where he was born and brought up- the cultural environment he was part of. Any attempt to tear him apart from the roots is contested.

The title *The Shadow Lines* itself reflects in the final analysis that there is no solid space either geographically or culturally. The title reflects the existence of various spaces only as abstractions- blurring into one another: alien space blurring into native space; cultural space into geographical space. Space, Ghosh shows, is a pure abstraction built up by psychic, political and cultural constructs. Space along with time has no absolute concrete demarcation and can move to and fro freely without constraint. Time and space can be designated only by shadow lines. Arvind Chowdhary, speaking of temporality in the novel, rightly claims that "the traditional concepts of time and space, understood in terms of distance and division or border gets questioned in the course of this journey into the past."⁵ As Meenakshi Mukherjee says: "Time in this novel can be illusory and concrete at the same time and likewise space can be fluid even when held solidly within the concrete scaffolding of a house or confirmed within the firm outlines etched national boundaries on a map."⁶ The narrator has this realization and upholds the notion he carried within himself about space.

I 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 border there existed another reality. The only relationship my vocabulary permitted between those separate realities was war of friendship. (219)

The narrator's notion gets gradually reversed when he realizes the fragile nature of borders. Kavita Daiya rightly points out that *The Shadow Lines* ultimately "reveal the fragility of partitions, borders between nations as etched out in maps and of frontiers policed by nation states that separate people, communities and families." However, Ghosh does not intend "to celebrate globalization" as Daiya says, but wants to argue that "communities are transnational through the work of historical memory." Ghosh suggests that "the nature of boundary can be understood through the metaphor of the looking glass: The national border between the people of India and West Pakistan resembles the mirror's boundary, in which the self and reflected other are the same (joined by visual and corporeal simultaneously)." Therefore, Daiya says that "in Ghosh's narrative, the borderline cannot destroy the fundamental identity of people on both sides of the boundary or render their changed into 'the other'."⁷

Notes and References

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