

Questing Border: The Search for Identity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

Raj Raj Mukhopadhyay

Abstract

This paper is a modest attempt to analyze Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* in terms of tracing the notion of identity which depends on institutionalized frame of reference. The construction of one's personal identity is intricately associated with the geo-political demarcations; furnishing a legitimate space to one's social and cultural position as well. The making and unmaking of identities is a complex process which inevitably includes the fragmentation of a composite selfhood along with the despicable politics of disintegrating one's country. This partitioning of national 'self' comes with the creation of illusive borderlines that delimits an individual to expand his/her consciousness and also confines him/her into a restricted physical space where s/he is engrossed in divisive machinations of power. This paper humbly seeks to fathom how Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* limns a relentless search for self-identity, which unfolds as mutable and inconstant in respect of religion, race, ethnicity and culture.

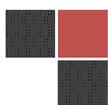
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Introduction

The eminent writer Amitav Ghosh's Sahitya Akademi award winning novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988) sheds light on the historical events like the Partition of India, Swadeshi movement and its effect, the second World War and the devastating communal riots occurring in Calcutta and Dhaka around 1963-64. The author in this novel has deliberately problematized the discourse of nation incorporating issues like partition and fragmented memories that ultimately lead to a persistent search for one's own identity. *The Shadow Lines* destabilizes the ideas that are deeply implanted in socio-cultural realities and simultaneously unmasking the delusive borderlines existing on political as well as personal level. Ghosh with his candid artistry interlaces historical facts with personal memories providing an emphatic fictional rendering of Benedict Anderson's assertion of nation being the "imagined community". In this novel, he has explored the dynamics of familial relations among individuals belonging to diverse communities that often transcend the 'shadow lines' of national or geo-political boundaries. The unnamed narrator, whose ethnic and cultural origin is based on larger multinational and inclusive realization, sets out to trace the complex association with colonial experiences offering a distinct narrative technique where the contours of past and present are blurred. The unreal construction of national boundaries effectively interrogates the spacial dimension from an objective point of view which delineates the conflict between illusion and reality. The cartographic demarcations separating people and nations are arbitrary in the sense that they do not have any concrete existence on the physical plane and are actually artificial borders which benefit only the politicians. The novel offers its readers a distinctive insight into colonial legacies and sketching these imagined shadowy lines is perceived as the root cause for the creation of fractured national identities. Ghosh penetrates much deeper into the urban middle-class values and orientation, divulging his reflections about cross-border humanity; and thereby envisaging a wider, international and cosmopolitan identity transcending the territorial frontiers and separatist propensities.

Mapping the Illusive Boundaries

The Shadow Lines presents the absurdity of geographical borders drawn between nation-states and common people. These illusive boundaries create enmity and antagonism among several residing communities which culminate in sectarian violence and political unrest. The death of Tridib and Jethamoshai in the hands of bloodthirsty rioters in the streets of Dhaka evidently establishes this fact. This murder in turn generated hostility in the mind of Tha'mma who became conscious of the segregated world consisting 'us' and 'them'. The partitioning of India in Ghosh's novel is projected "as an act of meaningless violence" (Sati 56). The novel efficaciously brings out the detrimental consequences of partition in human lives while at the same time addressing serious issues like nationalism, memory and historical incidents. It exclusively deals with the pernicious outcome of Partition, collective articulation of bereavement and desolation, challenging the fabricated construction of national identity. Not only the narrators and other characters of the novel are mutually connected with each other but also cities like London, Calcutta and Dhaka are paradoxically interlinked in spite of the unsubstantial divisions between them. The formation of a distinct national identity is seemed to be in flux and conceptualizing this aspect is indeed a problematic one because it happens to be a never-ending process. The socio-cultural paradigms are unfixed and volatile as they undergo change with the shifting and rearrangement of religious, lingual and racial

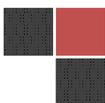


bases. Ghosh's way of dealing with national boundaries and geopolitical demarcations corresponds with Anderson's dictum regarding nation. For Ghosh, these borderlines are illusory and besides creating discrete identities, they act as divisive factors which result in violence and socio-political turmoil. The entire narrative revolves around violent historical events occurring as the consequences of political maps and cartographical divisions. Moreover, these arbitrary lines are instrumental in shaping the identity of an individual because these lines also determine the geographical boundaries of a nation. Thus, a nation is created by these "imagined" borderlines and hence, the constructed identity becomes delusory and erroneous. This point is explicitly revealed by Jethamoshai when Tha'mma tried to pursue him to return to Calcutta in order to embrace his extended family; he firmly declares, "I don't believe in this India-Shindia ... Suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? No one will have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here" (215). The futility of national borders is discernible from his speech as he strongly endorses the fixity of personal identities in accordance with native place. The central character of Tridib also advocates this viewpoint as he believes that it is not political boundaries but discordant facets like religion, race and language that separate people. According to Abeer Alrawashdeh,

Ghosh also reveals this theme of borders' absurdity through Tridib, the narrator's uncle, who believes that the borders drawn by politicians do not really perform as anything more than being shadows. These borders will never be able to separate people who share the same history and culture. For him, it is the riots and the factors leading to them that separate people. (4)

In this context, Taslima Nasreen's novel *Phera* (1993) is of worth mentioned. Nasreen depicts the character of Kalyani, who had to move from her own country Bangladesh to Calcutta in India like Ghosh's Tha'mma for fearing the safety of her life and honour after the Partition. She laments the loss of her native land and her passionate desire to visit Mymensingh is met with a catastrophic breakdown of hope and memory when she finds the ruins of her former home and the complete change of surrounding areas. While living in Calcutta, both Kalyani and Tha'mma suffered from homesickness and alienation, reiterated intimate memories of their ancestral house which served as an allegory of rootlessness and synecdochical relation with their nation. Like the character of Jethamoshai in *The Shadow Lines*, Nasreen's female protagonist Kalyani is a voice of rationality who too believes in the inefficacy of boundaries between states as she persistently interrogates the feasibility of partition. The narrator's grandmother Tha'mma who was uprooted from her birthplace Dhaka and took shelter in Calcutta after Partition, was unable to conceive the uselessness of political borders and was taken aback to know that there is actually no difference between the two separated landscapes. While travelling to Dhaka by aeroplane, she thought that "she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane" (151). When her son receives this ludicrous assumption with amusement, she puts forward a fundamental question which becomes significant in exposing the hollowness of artificial boundaries.

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



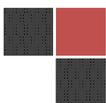
was it all for then – partition and all the killing and everything – if there isn't something in between? (151)

Both the novels can be read as subverting the predetermined and dualistic argumentation promulgated on the concepts of nationalism, identity, history and memory in drawing the boundaries of states and territories. Ghosh in this text manifests an inclusive national identity that in a certain way compels the readers to accept the ambivalences of political maps. Tridib's dauntless attempt to save Jethamoshai by stepping out of his car asserts this claim; he sacrificed his life trying to save an old man whose national identity was very different than his own. On another level, Ila, the narrator's cousin vehemently tries to get rid of her Indian socio-cultural milieu. Nevertheless, her complete acceptance in a foreign society, which happens to be the erstwhile colonizer, is jeopardized as she gets rejected by her classmates because of her racial identity. She is located at a critical space where the shadowy lines demarcate her ethnic origin which is completely detached from her present world of living. She could not be entirely assimilated into the western culture as those nebulous borderlines have created divisions in the western psyche that leads to her miserable treatment of being an inferior person. Ila's isolated existence is a result of her estrangement from her homeland, both at physical and metaphorical levels. Kalyani's life in *Phera* is a homologous vignette of Ila's struggle; a woman who is divorced from her familiar environment of simplicity into a foreign land, where her psycho-physical existence is susceptible to perils and hazards due to her sexual and gender identity. Both Ila and Kalyani, in their earnest effort to get a secured foothold in the metropolitan sphere of London and Calcutta, marry native individuals who soon turn out to be either disloyal (Nick) or nonchalant (Anirban) towards their womanly sentiments. Therefore, Ila's disillusionment of socio-political borders existing between Indian and western society finds a similar resonance with Jethamoshai's realization that there is actually no substantial incongruity among common people; the markers of disparity are created through variant psychosocial perceptions of human beings. Alpana Neogy rightly observes:

In the pursuit of a new kind of freedom – one that would enable her to realise her true self, Ila is confronted with a different set of problems: the absence of fidelity and trust in her marriage. (75)

The Pursuit of Identity

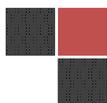
The construction of delusory borderlines is integrally associated with the formation of national identities. The inclusive and broader 'Indian' identity is shattered with partition resulting in the creation of fragmented religious identity. This is the factual reality with which Tha'mma cannot cope up. In her teenage, she had romanticized the dream of taking part in freedom movement for the liberation of her motherland, India. However, when the long cherished independence finally came with the bloodbath of Partition, she eventually realized that she was left out from her own country. Tha'mma never wished to return to her ancestral home in Dhaka as it became the capital of East Pakistan, whose religious identity was antithetical to her own. The shadowy lines created by the Partition in 1947 split up the country thereby forming two irreconcilable national identities primarily based on religion. The fences existing on the frontiers are purposely erected to project a vision of discordance and conflicts across political divisions. Tha'mma visualizes the existence of an altogether different reality on the other side of the border, which has segregated two nations. Renita Shirley's observation is quite relevant in this regard,



Thamma's conceptual mapping of the nation, which mirrors that of nationalism, is based upon the unifying effects of tradition represented in her mind under the guise of warfare that constitutes the main ingredient of a country's territorial integrity (104).

This situation is similar to Intizar Husain's short story "An Unwritten Epic" where the central character Pichwa fought his whole life for the creation of Pakistan but soon after Partition, he was shocked to find himself utterly left over from his dream land. Pichwa's bewilderment reflects the perplexity in Tha'mma's mind as these two figures are involved in a relentless search to foreground their individual identity. Tha'mma, who fostered revolutionary zeal deep in her heart and sought to participate in the war for independence, sustained her 'Indian' nationality by staying in Calcutta after Partition. The traumatic experience of riots in Dhaka that took away her uncle Jethamoshai's life impelled her to prioritize her religious identity as she donates her precious gold chain to fund the war against Pakistan. It is interesting to note that Tha'mma's world is now divided between 'us' and 'them'; and her antipathy is directed against those very people for whom she once dreamt to partake in freedom struggle. At this juncture, her remodified national identity is coalesced with her religious and regional identities. The same can be witnessed in Pichwa's case as he fervently tries to make his way into the new state of Pakistan for which he struggled hard. His outlook is analogous to the standpoint of Tha'mma and Kalyani, who all painfully strive to accept the new Indian state as their homeland thoroughly dejected by their own native place.

In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh explores the fallacy of political mappings and "problematizes nationalism in his search for identity" (Das 87). He envisages an ideal world not limited by familiar shadowy boundaries and which has its existence on a new realm beyond the constricted walls of nation-states. The novel essentially scrutinizes the process through which national identity is shaped and brings to light the invalidity of geographical borders that are basically imaginary manufactured. Ghosh also inquires into the homogeneous construction of national identity as the violent communal clashes emphatically disrupt any unidimensional foundation of heterogeneous communities. As the novel gradually unfolds, Tha'mma's nationalist ideas seem to be undermined as the absurdity of borders is revealed and she is compelled to accept the fact that two opposite sides of the geo-political borders are alike. Utterly baffled, she then proceeds to question the actual motive of partition, subsequently comprehending the intangibility of national border, which is just a mirage. The author, with his ingenuous craftsmanship, brings to the surface the illogical nature of partition that can never denote social or cultural disparities among common masses residing across the border. As a matter of fact, these shadowy lines are spurious products of the preposterous whims of political leaders. The focal point of Ghosh's concern is that the divisive boundaries of nation are arbitrarily considered as elementary strands of identity formation; and as the national borders are impermanent and imbalanced, therefore, the national identity of citizens is marked with temporality and inconstancy. This spatio-temporal positionality of an individual delineates the crisis generated by unreasonable fabrication of national boundaries. Jethamoshai's sensible approach in *The Shadow Lines* runs parallel with Saadat Hasan Manto's story "Toba Tek Singh" where only the lunatic Bishan Singh exhibits the voice of sanity and reason. The Partition has not only created a shift in their psychological perception of national identity but has also altered the mode of apprehending their familiar environment. Jethamoshai suddenly becomes an 'outsider' in his own homeland



as the shadow line of partition has bifurcated his religious identity from his indigenous identity. The case is quite relatable to Bishan Singh's bewilderment because his religious identity has estranged him from his birthplace. The anxiety of insane Bishan Singh gets merged with the concern of Jethamoshai, who happens to be an exemplar of rationality, prudence and sanity. It is actually the fallacious borderlines, which alienate Jethamoshai and Bishan Singh from their native places.

...they had no idea where Pakistan was... . If they were in India, then where was Pakistan? If they were in Pakistan, how come that only a short while ago they were in India? How could they be in India a short while ago and now suddenly in Pakistan?

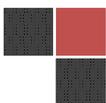
While talking about this fallacy of partition, Pabitra Bharali aptly comments,

...political division of nation(s) is nothing but a farcical act... In the novel there is a growing sense that the logic of the nation state is necessarily at odds with various forms of sub continental community – that to be Indian is to be perversely and perhaps unsuccessfully defined oneself against one's mirror image from across the border. (46)

The indefinite lines that delimit inter-state borders dividing people into insiders and foreigners are not palpable reality for Ghosh. These obfuscatory lines have profound impacts on the subconscious mind of a person and tend to create a fractured version of the self. When character like Tridib breaks these artificial lines; like Bishan Singh, who had (un)knowingly done so, he concomitantly becomes part of the wider globe around himself. This novel outlines the ideological aspects of nation and identity before its readers for reconsideration of political design rooted in unjustifiable machinations of power. Renita Shirley in her article further refers to Robert Dixon, who has argued that the characters in Ghosh's novels do not occupy discrete cultures, but dwell in travel in the cultural spaces that flow across borders in the shadow lines drawn around modern nation states (108). The unending problem of locating identities has emanated from the historical event of Partition, which explicitly indicates the fact that postcolonial nations are grounded in ruthless violence. The fortified boundaries drawn to deal with national sentiments have culminated in producing communal hatred and political aggression. Throughout the entire course of the novel, the narrator grows up slowly apprehending the illusory nature of borderlines between people and nations. In fact, Ila also seeks to assert her inherent identity in a foreign country separated from her native place not only by seas and oceans on the physical plane, but also with innumerable tenebrous streaks which disconnect the innate socio-cultural position at the metaphorical level. She can neither accustom herself with her British classmates in school because of her racial identity nor with her husband Nick owing to the intrinsic moral and ethical values. She finds herself in a convoluted locale isolated both from her present domain of living in England and the traditional lifestyle of India, the space of her ethnic origin. Hence, the author does not acknowledge any fabricated national or cultural reality because for him "all such demarcations are shadow lines, arbitrary and invented divisions" (Bharali 46).

Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh in a unique way has complicated the conventional notion of constructing national identity in the context of colonialism and beyond. *The Shadow Lines* reverberates the claim that individual freedom is correlated with political machineries, which are in many instances disruptive and schismatic in nature. The author renders the

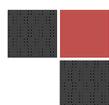


implausibility of fashioning ideas like nationalism, partition, identity etc. by challenging the homogeneity of nation-states and recording the vicious activities which destroy the bond of fraternity prevailing among various people in the country. The hypothesis of nation is difficult to conceptualize as it becomes an elusive entity because “principal protagonists in the drama are unable to make sense of its resonant contradictions” (Malathi 307). The complex structure of the novel is crafted in an excellent technique through which the readers recognize the interlacing of personal with the political, by undermining the physical reality of cartographic borderlines. Tridib intensifies the function of imaginative faculty to cherish freedom as he discerns the significance of discovering the global and the regional to initiate a cord of union between human beings and power. The communal riots not only generated animosity and repugnance between Hindus and Muslims but also we often come across exceptional cases of sympathy and tolerance for each other. The portrayal of characters like Saifuddin and Khalil who both are compassionate towards Jethamoshai and nourish the spirit of brotherhood is truly a noteworthy feature crafted on part of the author. Scholars and critics have often viewed that the novel attempts to frame an ideal cosmopolitan image which will in due course of time, encompass different races and cultures in order to foster a harmonious picture of human world. Dharam Paul’s observation is important in this context,

As an impartial historiographer Ghosh ... points out the partiality, lopsidedness and suppression of institutional history by unearthing the syncretism and humanitarian acts of ordinary human beings both in India and East Pakistan, who rescued as well as sheltered the victims of riots irrespective of their religion ... there were innumerable cases of Muslims in Pakistan giving shelter to Hindus, often at the cost of their own lives, and equally, in India, of Hindus sheltering Muslims. (66-67)

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