

ISSN: 0976-8165

# The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Vol. 7, Issue- 3 [June 2016]

## 7th Year of Open Access

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

*The Criterion*



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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

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## Re-narrating National History in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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*The Shadow Lines* as a post-colonial novel questions several nationalist assumptions imbibed in a post-colonial country. It studies how the narrative of nationalism constructs a nation imaginatively, based on one's prejudices and insecurities. Rejecting the inherited history, the novel emphasizes the urgency of reconstructing an alternate history based on memory and oral narratives. Through the use of an unreliable narrator, a child, Amitav Ghosh subverts the conventional fixities of a plot structure, like dates and events. He shows how nationalism, instead of eliminating violence from the society, incorporates it within the body polity, thereby creating a new fear psychosis.

*The Shadow Lines* is the story of a Bengali family, of three generations, chalking out their psychic journeys from coloniality to post-coloniality, with a corresponding physical migration from Dhaka to Calcutta in pre-independence India, and the consequent coming to terms with a new imagined identity. Thamma, the matriarch, or the grandmother of the narrator and her sister Mayadebi were born at their ancestral house in Dhaka in the early years of last century. The joint family comprised of two brothers, Thamma's father and her uncle, and their children. When the children were young, the two brothers quarrelled and divided their house in a lawyer like precision, letting the partition run through doors and lavatory and even their father's old nameplate. The partition soon acquired an uncanny significance in the imagination of the children, redefining the other side as an inverted image of their own side. Thus, in spite of physical separation, they remained ever tied to each other by virtue of their curious imagination. Thamma was married to an engineer working for the colonial railways and posted in Burma. Mayadebi was married to the rich and famous Datta-Chaudhuri from Calcutta. Thamma's husband all of a sudden died leaving behind his thirty-two years old wife and ten years old child to fend for themselves. Her parents had died even before that, and finding no one to fall back in Dhaka she came to Calcutta for survival. She joined a high school as a teacher and for the next twenty-seven years served there bringing up her child, alone without any help from her rich relatives. India achieved independence in the meantime, and her place of birth, Dhaka was lost forever to a new country, Pakistan.

Mayadebi and her husband, a diplomat mostly stayed abroad. Their eldest son, an economist with the U.N. shuttled from one country to another, with their small daughter Ila. Tridib, the second son stayed almost all throughout in Calcutta with his grandmother and was doing his Ph.D in Archaeology. The youngest, Robi stayed with his parents. Mayadebi and her husband, the sahib visited London for the latter's treatment just before the Second World War began and stayed with Mrs. Price and her family (their family friend). Tridib was about eight at that time and quite excited to find London preparing for the War. It was England at one of her rarest moments with 'a kind of exhilaration in the air' (66), buoyant with a nationalistic fervour. May, Mrs. Price's daughter was about eight years younger to Tridib and a baby then, yet he was quite fond of her. He kept contacts with the Price family and expressed his love for May when he was thirty years old and she twenty-two. He invited her to come to India, because herein only

they could find a place ‘without a past, without history’ where they could meet as really free people.

In the meantime Sahib was posted in Dhaka. Thamma had retired from her school and was coping with her post-retirement blues, when she came to know that her old uncle in Dhaka was still alive. Now she was worried for him, being left alone in a *foreign* land, a nation for the Muslims. She wanted to bring back him to her invented country, India, the country for the Hindus. They decided to visit Dhaka along with May and Tridib when the former came to India. Those days the incident of Hazratbal had just happened in Kashmir, and tension was running high between India and Pakistan. Yet on a relatively peaceful Thursday, they set out on their mission to retrieve the old uncle. Ukil babu, as he was known refused to leave the land where he was born, rejecting to be a part of India, since he did not believe in all these ‘India-shindia’. The old man was looked after by a rickshaw puller, Khalil, who though a Muslim regarded him as his father. Khalil brought him out on his rickshaw on the pretext of taking him to the court where he had once practised. On their way out of the lane, their official Mercedes was accosted by a mob; failing to stop the car the irate mob attacked the rickshaw behind. The hapless sight of Ukilbabu and Khalil being engulfed by people brought May out of the car, running towards the crowd. May, unaware of the implications of stepping out in such an unpredictable situation was prompted by human instincts. Tridib realised the danger she was in; so pushing her aside he went ahead himself. The mob rejected May, the memsahib while consuming Ukilbabu, Khalil and Tridib, tearing them off into pieces.

May, a young girl of twenty two, returned to London with a guilt of taking Tridib’s life; after years of arrogant sentimental pride, she realised, she didn’t kill him after all, ‘I couldn’t have, if I’d wanted. He gave himself up; it was a sacrifice’ (251). Tridib was narrator’s uncle and mentor, one who had given him eyes, imagination and the desire to know the world. The narrator had always seen in himself an image of Tridib since his childhood, like his alter ego. Yet he was the only person who didn’t know the truth about Tridib’s death. Why he died and how he died? He knew Tridib was in love with May, and she came because he called her to India. They together went to Dhaka, but came back without Tridib. As a young boy of eleven, he was informed by his parents that Tridib died in a car accident. It took him seventeen long years to uncover the truth, from Robi, Tridib’s younger brother and later from May. In London where he went for study many years later could he break their silence on Tridib’s death, a fact that had been relegated to the realm of silence in fear of the state even by his own family.

Tridib’s death in Dhaka changed Thamma forever, multiplying her sense of insecurities and disillusionment with her invented country. In spite of her birth in Dhaka, East Pakistan became the land of the enemy forever. The 1965 Indo-Pak war drove her into a frenzy of patriotism and she donated the most precious thing in her life, her husband’s first gift to her; a neck-chain for the war fund. During war, personal memory was superseded by nationalistic zeal; personal loss compensated by national gains and Thamma aligned her personal fate with the destiny of the nation. She screams: ‘I gave it to the fund for the 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’ (237). The shared memory of an unpartitioned India, a collective past of Hindu Muslim together gave way to a monolithic identity of the Indian as Hindu. Generations of neighbours and friends were viewed now through the tinted glass of religious fanaticism. In post-colonial India, religious identity became a stronger binding factor than even nationalism. Borders ceased to be borders- a marker of distance, it transformed into looking-glass borders, reflecting the essential

similitude of the people of either side. The narrator learns the 'meaning of distance' within the tidy ordering of Euclidean space, and also how such meanings are negated by the reality of the subcontinent.

Hanoi and Chungking are nearer Khulna than Srinagar, and yet, did the people of Khulna care at all about the fate of the mosques in Vietnam and South China (a mere stone's throw away)? I doubted it. In this other direction, it took no more than a week.... The partition has in fact given birth to 'a yet-undiscovered irony- the irony that killed Tridib: the simple fact that there had never been a moment in the four-thousand-year-old history of that map, when places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines, - so closely that I, in Calcutta, had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free- our looking glass border.' (232)

*The Shadow Lines* is not a story created out of the historical narratives found in the national archives. It's a story resurrected rather from the gaps, breaches and silences within such public narratives. The narrator has to rely heavily on private memories to reconstruct his story. The recurrent question that is asked in the novel is 'Do you remember'. As Suvir Kaul points out this insistence on memory not only brings together the personal and the public; it also shapes the narrators search for connections for the recovery of lost information or repressed experiences, for the details of great trauma or joy that have receded into the archives of public or private memory. The narrator listens to the stories from the grandmother, Tridib, Ila and finally Robi and May, their versions recollected from memory and becomes a repository and archivist of his family stories. But he is constantly engaged in the imaginative renewal of times, places, events and people past; his search is fundamentally for meaning, for explanations and reasons, for the elusive formal or causal logic that will allow the narrator's autobiography and also the national biography that is interwoven with it, to cohere, to make sense. In *The Shadow Lines* the shaping force of memory is enormously productive and enabling, but also traumatic and disabling, it liberates and stunts, both the individual imagination and social possibilities; it confirms identities and enforces divides. Memory is above all, a restless, energetic, troubling power, the price, and the limitation, of freedom; the abettor, and the interrogator, of the form and existence of the modern nation-state. His desperate search to locate the riots of 1964 which had taken Tridib's life is in fact a resistance to let one's own story be subsumed by the dominant history. The riots of 1964 which are indelibly engraved in his memory had by 1979 'vanished without leaving a trace in the histories and the bookshelves. They had dropped out of memory into a crater of a volcano of silence. The narrator needs to dismantle the public chronicle of the nation because it threatens to erase his private story. Thus *The Shadow Lines* as Suvir Kaul rightly points out is 'an archaeology of silences, a slow brushing away of the cob-webs of modern Indian memory, a repeated return to those absences and fissures that mark the sites of personal and national trauma' (1995: 269). The narrator comes to discover that these silences are not accidental, but are 'constitutive of the nature of Indian modernity, indeed of the identity of the post-colonial sub continental nation-states of India and Pakistan'. To articulate these silences, to give them a language to ascribe to them a causal and structural place within the syntax of the modern nation, is to acknowledge a difficult and often-repressed truth, that states, and citizens are founded on violence. However, to acknowledge is to take the first step in the process of mourning and perhaps of recovery, and it is this process that *The Shadow Lines* represents to its readers.

Amitav Ghosh insists on details, whether it's identifying a time or a place. All the important places are furnished with details even up to the house numbers (1/31, Jindabaha Lane, Dhaka; or 44, Lymington Road, London) and the events are marked with the respective years. It lends credibility to the story and also a sense of verisimilitude to the places. It also makes it look like a historical document. Ghosh does not only mark the events with definite years, he in fact goes beyond to use an alternative system of finding and locating events and happenings in one's memory. For instance, we are said Mayadebi and her family left for London when she was twenty-nine and Tridib eight, and that was thirteen years before the narrator was born. Or when the narrator says; 'I met May Price for the first time two years after that incident, when she came to Calcutta on a visit. The next time I met her was seventeen years later, when I went to London myself' (13). Such narration gives the novel continuity, a relatedness making it a story, not a document of discrete historical details. Ghosh proves another significant point here, that dates are less important than the events in the lives of the people. History is not facts or dates but the real story of the people, which is recorded by an alternative system of marking in the human mind. Memory uses such a system to record the past, where all the events are interrelated and can be identified and differentiated by the intervening years.

A.N. Kaul points out in his essay 'A Reading of *The Shadow Lines*' that Ghosh is not the first to view nationalism as both an invention and a source of terrifying violence and his (Ghosh) proclamation of the death of nationalism is premature (1995: 301). He also puts the responsibility on Ghosh to provide with the 'kinds of globalism' that are likely to supplant it and with (what) implications for freedom and culture. One does agree with Kaul that *The Shadow Lines* views nationalism as a construct and a destructive force. But Ghosh's concern here is not to start a debate on nationalism vs. globalism; rather to point out that in spite of long claims made by propounders of nationalism, it has failed to bind the people together rising above racial, linguistic or religious differences. Moreover the birth of a nation can give rise to nationalism, but it cannot erase the collective memory of the people. Neither can it bring a sense of togetherness all of a sudden between diverse groups, just because they happen to be bound by the same geographical boundary. Ghosh points out the inadequacy and immaturity of the idea that the forces of nationalism can suppress the separationist trends of the people; he also points out that the nationalist leaders cannot be blamed altogether for this presumption, because that was the pattern all over the world at that time. It was a legacy of the colonial struggle. The leaders unsuspectingly believed 'in moving violence, to the borders and dealing with it through science and factories,' because they had faith 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 Gondwanaland. What had they felt, I wondered, when they discovered that they had created not a separation, but a yet-undiscovered irony- the irony that killed Tridib: 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. (233)

Thus, as Meenakshi Mukherjee remarks, 'the construction of a nation is a two-way process, entailing on the one hand a broad homogenisation despite seeming differences, of what lies within the boundaries and a projection of alienness upon what is situated outside' (1995: 262).

This has been illustrated both literally and metaphorically within the story. When Jindabaha Lane house in Dhaka was partitioned long ago, Thamma invented stories about the other part of the house to highlight the strangeness and absurdity of the inversion of normalcy. The stories about the 'upside-down house' proliferated over the years and the 'strange thing was that as we grew older, even I almost came to believe in our stories' (126). This house metaphor is worked out by tying it up with the division of Bengal. The grandmother's expectation of the visibility of the border between India and East Pakistan indirectly grew out of her experience of the territorial division she had witnessed in childhood. Thus she came to believe that the borders should be explicit, that the lines should be clearly marked on the land by 'trenches or something', otherwise what was the point of so much of violence and bloodshed during the partition of India in 1947 if the difference and separation between the two nations is not pronounced emphatically. In a novel where stories are accorded as much reality as lived experiences, this highlights the process whereby the identity of a nation is consolidated through imagined hostility with the neighbours. Ironically, this is the same uncle whom grandmother wants to reclaim later on, though that family connection had long been estranged and nearly forgotten. She says: 'It doesn't matter whether we recognise each other or not. We're the same flesh, the same blood, the same bone....' (129). For her the family represented a moral order, the violation of which led to moral anarchy. In a country, where family relations are accorded such priority, nationalism is bound to be relegated to a secondary category. Hence, nationalism thrives on the curious ignorance of the people about their neighbours. The official history caters to its growth to strengthen the hold of the government over its citizens through a selective historical documentation.

There is another incident, which enables us to understand this phenomenon. The young narrator meets Nick Price, the younger brother of May much later only when he visits London. But he knew Nick right from his childhood as a 'spectral presence' in his imagination, hearing repeatedly from Ila about her relations with Nick. Nick Price 'became a spectral presence beside me in my looking glass; growing with me, but always bigger and better, and in some way more desirable- I did not know what, except that it was so in Ila's eyes and therefore true' (50). This is significant on two accounts. His image of Nick is a received image, delivered to him by Ila, and hence based on ignorance of truth. Secondly, he considers it true because that image is desirable to Ila and he loves her. So it's his longing for her, which lends Nick's image credibility. Before his return from London, at the last get-together at Mrs Price's house, he reveals a better understanding of Nick and his all apprehensions are cleared. With that realisation, Nick is no more a rival, a spectral presence standing beside him in the mirrors of my boyhood, and always more desirable. Rather he finds him on the same level equalised by their unequal needs of Ila. 'I wanted to get up then and hold him, chest to chest, his shoulders to mine' (189). Such a comprehension of the 'other' is necessary for saving one's own self, from getting locked into a continual trap of rivalry and misconception, being a victim to false portrayals by vested interests. As Thomas Szasz had said once: 'In the animal kingdom, the rule is, eat or be eaten; in the human kingdom, define or be defined' (1974: 20). That's what Tridib also cautions the narrator about; that one could not see without inventing what one saw. On Ila's asking why should one try to invent and not take the world as it is, the narrator gives her his mentor's reply: 'we had to try because the alternative wasn't blankness - it only meant that if we didn't try ourselves, we

would never be free of other people's inventions' (31). Amitav Ghosh's intention in *The Shadow Lines* is not to discredit nationalism but to underscore the necessity to free oneself from all kinds of constructs in order to achieve an identity, which is truly postcolonial.

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