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Absurdities of Borders and Frontiers of Conflict: A Study of *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract:

The issues of geographical borders and maps charted out of the unfortunate Partitions have been widely and extensively dealt in the postcolonial literary texts. Amitav Ghosh as a responsible and remarkable postcolonial Indian English novelist has portrayed the aftermath of Partitions, postcolonial identity crises, the meaninglessness of national boundaries and the ever haunting sense of alienation in most of his fictional works. He has exclusively dealt with the concept of national 'Border' in his second novel *The Shadow Lines* published in 1988. The novel won Ghosh the prestigious Sahitya Akademy Award in 1989. He has questioned the very concept of border drawn out of some selfish political interests which affected the age long harmonious environment of co-existence of people of the same culture, language and ethnicity.

The Shadow Lines represents Ghosh's vision of a borderless world and reconstruction of a nation after the announcement of a new territorial border. The novel under study is set against the background of the Partition of two nation-states, India and Pakistan followed by communal riots and its overall impact upon the lives of the concerned people. It also takes up the challenge of portraying the complexity of national identity that follows the Partition. Ghosh questions the very concept of nationalist boundaries that enflames the fire of hatred, communalism, revenge and wrath. The borders which are etched upon the map are only shadow lines and geographical borders and that cannot separate the cultural, lingual, ethnic and historical sensibilities. Though, Calcutta and Dhaka, as depicted in the novel, are two distinct places after the Bengal division, yet the two cities are close bound to each other.

This paper intends to examine Amitav Ghosh's notion of borderless human world where people would live in harmony with no discord and differences in hearts. This paper further, aims to point out the meaninglessness of borders which is meant to be responsible for the sufferings in the lives of common lot. Ghosh's penchant for questioning the unreal borders is the central theme of the study here in this paper.

Keywords: Border, Partition, Nationalism, Violence, Migration, Identity crisis.

The novels written on the theme of Partition follow the common pattern of violence, agony, communal hatred, alienation, identity crisis and psychic trauma. The tragic tales of woe and strife after the Partition have been documented in a number of Indian English novels such as *A Bend in the Ganges*, *Train to Pakistan*, *Twice Born Twice Dead*, *The Rape* and *Midnight's Children*. An important fact of the writings on the Partition in English is that most of the novels depict the pain and pang of the citizens of north-west Indian frontier but, Amitav Ghosh in his second novel, *The Shadow Lines* (1998), deals with the partition of the province of Bengal into West Bengal and East Bengal or East Pakistan that later in 1971 became a new sovereign nation-Bangladesh. In this novel Ghosh is not just a disinterested onlooker while depicting the upheaval of Partition rather presents a realistic but shocking picture of communal riots. Apart from depicting the agonized state of affairs, Ghosh invokes the idea of non-existent shadow lines between two nations which share common culture, history, language and mental fixation. He puts forth the triviality of the shadow lines drawn between two pieces of common land and common people because of some petty political interest which ultimately proves as an absurd illusion. The border drawn to bifurcate two nations and people becomes the source of terrific violence, nostalgic lament and terrible misfortunes.

The story of the *The Shadow Lines* is about two families—the Prices of London and the Datta- Choudhuris of Bengal, which have long years of friendship spanning three generations. Ghosh has masterfully woven together personal lives and public events. He raises a thoughtful question regarding the artificial division of land and people to serve political purpose. His characters such as Tridib, Tha'mma, Jethamosai, Robi and the unnamed narrator are mouthpieces who question the etching out of political boundaries which are merely shadow lines. Meenakshi Mukherjee a noted critic in her essay, "Maps and Mirrors: Co-ordinates of Meaning in *The Shadow Lines*", writes that: "*The Shadow Lines* obviously questions the idea of nationhood that is consolidated through the baptism of wars or coercive state apparatus" (*The Perishable Empire* 146).

Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* questions the very concept of border. His five characters in the novel—Tha'mma, Tridib, Jethamoshai, the narrator and Robi become the mouthpieces of the author. They provide five perspectives on borders and thus Ghosh explores the unreality and invalidity of borders and ideas such as nation and nationalism. The questioning of nationhood arises after the partition or carving out of international borders which are unreal borders. The shallowness of borders can be seen in the partition of Bengal that has been a traumatic shock to the people till date. The people of undivided Bengal refuse to believe the existence of the boundaries between India and Bangladesh which divide people and create a new diasporic identity. Tha'mma, the grandmother of the narrator, while asked to fill up the visa form to visit her ancestral home in Dhaka stumbles for a moment and says: "What do they want to know about on those forms?" (*The Shadow Lines* 167). Tha'mma's son replies: "They want your nationality, your date of birth, place of birth, that kind of thing" (TSL 167). Tha'mma slumps

back in her chair with a sort of hopelessness because of the prospect of filling in ‘Dhaka’ as her place of birth on the visa form, which was no more the part of the nation she lived now. She is shocked to realize that the place of her birth has come to be so messily at odds with her nationality.

Ghosh in this novel portrays that a nation does not exist as a physical entity. He points out that a nation lives through the cultural commonality. Tha'mma in the novel projects the narrowness that come with borders in terms of humanity and cultural exchange. Tha'mma is worried about her journey to Dhaka from Calcutta. Her son reminds her of the earlier travelling between Burma and Dhaka. Tha'mma replies to it in these words:

It wasn't the same thing. There weren't any forms or anything and anyway travelling was so easier then. I could come home to Dhaka whenever I wanted. (TSL 168)

The perspective of nation and border that Tha'mma keeps is that those are only nations which have borders drawn with blood. She rejects the borders which are drawn because of political decisions. She acknowledges the sacrifices of the people of a country who have etched their territory through bloodshed. In her regimental tone she describes the making of a country and praises the Europeans and glorifies the impact of wars to make a nation:

Wars are their religion. That's what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this or that. Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi they become a family born of the same pool of blood. (TSL 86)

Tha'mma on her way to her ancestral home in Dhaka by plane wants to see the border drawn between India and East Pakistan which divides the two nations. But, she is found puzzled to know that the border cannot be seen from the plane. She conceives to find ‘trenches perhaps, or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land’ (TSL 167). When she gets briefed by her son about no such things there in the border, she replies:

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? (TSL 167)

Thus, Amitav Ghosh questions the meaninglessness of border that made people violent and moreover, the author presents the complexity of national identity.

The second perspective of questioning the concept of border in the novel under discussion is by Jethamoshai, the grand uncle of Tha'mma. Jethamoshai remained in Dhaka after the Partition even if his sons left him and he was all alone then. His house was occupied by Muslims from Bihar but as he gave much importance to the place he was born and brought up he

remained in Dhaka. He had no belief in arbitrary lines, whereas, Tha'mma is nostalgic towards Dhaka but she has no problem to accept Calcutta as her new home. Jethamoshai is not ready to leave his birth place at all. Tha'mma requests Jethamoshai to accompany her to Calcutta to avoid any misfortune but Jethamoshai is confident enough to decide to stay in Dhaka and he says:

I know everything. I understand everything. Once you start moving you never stop. That's what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: I don't believe in this India-Shindia. It's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here (TSL 237).

Jethamoshai becomes the mouthpiece of Ghosh to depict the arbitrate perspective of border. The author is of the opinion that drawing borders is arbitrary in nature and furthermore he criticizes the political nuances behind it.

Tridib, the narrator's uncle, is the guide and mentor to the narrator. He demonstrates the narrator a Bartholomew's Atlas in which one can find any place of the world. The Atlas is metaphoric to the illusion of boundaries. Tridib's perspective of border is that borders are ultimately fictive in nature. On being asked about the place of an event while he was telling a story he says:

That's the trick, you see. It happened everywhere, wherever you wish it. It was an old story, the best story in Europe, Snipe said, told when Europe was a better place, a place without borders and countries—it was a German story in what we call Germany, Nordic in the north, French in France, Welsh in Wales, Cornish in Cornwall: it was the story of a hero called Tristan, a very sad story, about a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman-across-the-seas...(TSL 205-206).

Thus, Ghosh points out the arbitrariness of cartographic demarcations and believes that the borders are meaningless.

Robi, a youth of the post-Partition era, is philosophical to the concept of border. He has a sound knowledge of the creation of the border and its disturbances. He says:

And then I think to myself why don't they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every 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" (TSL 272)?

The events of the novel *The Shadow Lines* are mostly linked by the narrator who is the nephew of Tridib. He lets the readers know the facts from the memories of different other characters. He researches about the actual facts of the historical events such as freedom movement in undivided

Bengal, the Second World War, the Partition of India in 1947 and the riots of 1964. After long fifteen years of his findings and understanding he comes to a point of finality and says:

I was a child, and like all the children around me, I grew up believing in the truth of the percepts that were available to me: I believed in the reality of space; I believed that distance separates, that 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. (TSL 257)

Ghosh gives us glimpses of the reactions full of hatred that shook both Dhaka and Calcutta and that too because of the border. The author has tried to depict the meaninglessness of borders or the divisive instinct of demarcations on the ground of hatred and violence. He portrays the unfateful event of 1964 when after a rumour of vanishing of a holy relic in Kashmir—Mu-i-Mubarak in Hajrat Bal Mosque, riots unleashed in Khulna and Dhaka across the border. The Hindus of Bangladesh were killed in mere supposition that the Hindus might have stolen the Mu-i-Mubarak. But the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs of Kashmir had no animosity among them. This all happened because of the destabilizing factors of the border. Ghosh questions such concept of border or nationalism as well which is based on the logic of binary or otherness.

Ghosh makes use of map also to appeal for a borderless universe. The narrator is amazed to know that how people fight with each other across borders even if they share a common language, culture, past and present. The insanity brought by carved out borders has been questioned by Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* and he hopes for harmonious environment. He puts forth the fact that how Calcutta and Khulna facing each other at a watchful equidistance get outrageous on rumours. Ghosh finds no cause to have borders only to make distances between cities or people closely bound to each other for centuries and ages.

To conclude, it can pertinently be said that Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* explores the meaninglessness of borders which divide people of a same piece of land that leads to brutality, agony and distortion. He presents a realistic but shocking picture of communal riots and along with that he asserts that boundaries are the causes of violence. He negates the territorial demarcations and regards the boundaries as shadow lines. The writer identifies that boundaries give impetus to terrorism, chauvinism, fanaticism and religious intolerance. The three generations of a Bengali family dispersed across three countries. This was a consequence of the historical Partition; failing to serve the purpose being the freedom of people. The narrative projects the absurdities of borders and frontiers of conflict.

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