

*The Shadow Lines* as a Political Novel

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By

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*The Shadow Lines* as a Political Novel

**Introduction**

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, published in 1988, is a political novel that focuses mostly on nationalism, the meaninglessness of partition and the 1964 communal riots which occurred in Calcutta, Dhaka and Khulna. This paper attempts to investigate *The Shadow Lines* from the perspective of nationalism to reflect on the negative impact it had on peoples' minds because of political uncertainties. This paper will also discuss the patriarchal indifference to women's contribution in the Indian National Movement with extracts from the novel in the following chapters, "*The Shadow Lines* & Nationalism" and "Criticism of Nationalism in *The Shadow Lines*".

Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* chronicles three generations in a family saga that spreads over Dhaka, Calcutta and London. The book is divided into two parts, "Going Away" and "Coming Home". In the first section, the narrator draws the picture of a war-ravaged London and also depicts the family rapport between the Prices and Mayadebi whose son Tridib enchants the narrator with his story telling and in-depth knowledge of many places. A love relationship between Tridib and May Price, the daughter of the Prices, develops when May returns to Calcutta. The narrator learns about the war from Tridib, his gifted uncle. In the second section of *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh pays attention to communal strife in Calcutta and Dhaka caused by the loss of the Prophet's hair from Hazratbal shrine, Srinagar.

Throughout this novel, Ghosh attempts to draw attention to the futility of political freedom. Ghosh also raises objections against peoples' war-mongering attitude, the rushed partition, communal frenzies, intermittent violence and clashes that resulted in the snapping of

ties between India and Pakistan. However, Ghosh also tries to depict this novel from a humanitarian perspective.

In *The Shadow Lines*, each character is depicted from the narrator's perspective in which the lives of the major characters --- Thamma, narrator's grandmother; his uncle Tridib, Ila, his distant cousin; Robi, Tridib's brother; and May, Tridib's English beloved--- take different paths because of changes in politics. Thamma, who supported the cause of Indian Independence during partition, discovers the brutal side of nationalist politics when she witnesses her nephew, Tridib, getting murdered in a 1964 communal strife in Dhaka. Tridib's murder shell-shocks May. She does not return to India after her lover's death. Ila and her uncle Robi never look back to India and decide to stay in England for the rest of their life. Jethamoshai has no interest in returning to his birthplace Dhaka. Ironically, his own countryman takes his life away in a riot. Tridib's death ends Thamma's romantic notions of a life without borders. She is an underrated nationalist who contributed her labor and money to the nationalist movement that led to the Indian independence. Almost at the end of *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator gets a 'glimpse' (*The Shadow Lines*, 252) of 'a final redemptive mystery' (*TSL*, 252) as he unlocks the real reason behind Tridib's death and also listens to May's version of her relationship with Tridib.

In this dissertation, I will discuss *The Shadow Lines* from a political perspective. In Chapter 1, "The Shadow Lines & Nationalism" I will focus my discussion mostly on the meaninglessness of the partition of India and the 1964 communal riots that saw many people lose their lives because of bloodsheds. In this chapter, I will also discuss Ghosh's search for "the little stories of small places" (Gera, 2003: 11) as he digs up almost forgotten incidents of the 1964 communal strife and revisits and retells those stories from a nationalist perspective. Ghosh comes out of the Eurocentric discourse of partition and gives minute details of incidents never

highlighted in mainstream history. He is a Postmodern writer in the sense that he does not depict his tales from a linear perspective; instead he shifts his narration from past to present by melding different stories into one organic whole. In the last chapter of this dissertation, “Criticism of Nationalism in *The Shadow Lines*”, I will discuss the negative impact of Indian Nationalism attempting to show the way the discourse of nationalism subjugates the contribution of third world women. In this chapter, I will also connect Rabindranath’s idea of nationalism to Ghosh’s ideas of Nationalism. I will show similarities in ideology between Ghosh and Rabindranath. In *The Shadow Lines*, Thamma’s contribution to the nationalist movement of India is not given its fair share of credit by male chauvinistic Indian nationalist. I will prove that history has not taken into consideration the indelible role women played in the struggle for independence. My dissertation will also show how political turbulence, bloodshed and massive killings impacted on peoples’ minds.

Many critics have discussed *The Shadow Lines* from various perspectives. I have had to read many articles on this novel for my dissertation. I have mostly tried to use them for reference, but the dissertation is a product of my own interpretation. In what follows, I summarize the point of view of some of the leading critics on *The Shadow Lines*. According to Kaul (1990), *The Shadow Lines* is concerned with nationalism, culture and language (21). In “Theme of Partition and Freedom in Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*”, Pabby (1990) notes that the real sorrow of partition as portrayed in *The Shadow Lines* is that the abrupt end of a shared communal history and cultural heritage (22). As a result of partition, Thamma and her Jethamoshai are forced to live in a separate land despite sharing the same communal history and cultural heritage. In her article, “The Partition of Bengal: A Comparative Study of Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* and Sunil Gongopadhyay’s *Purba*

*Paschim*”, Alpana Neogy stresses that *The Shadow Lines* is concerned with displacement and alienation in the adopted land and the dream of returning to homeland one day. Seema Bhadhuri, in her article, “Of Shadows, Lines and Freedom: A Historical Reading of *The Shadow Lines*” discusses the changing ethos in peoples’ mentality in post-partition eras. In “Contrasting Strands of Political Nuances in *The Shadow Lines*”, Novy Kapdaia praises Amitav Ghosh for brilliantly sketching everyone’s quest for political freedom, and the impact of rumour in violent times. In “A Great Way to Fly”, Heng (1997) draws a contrasting picture between nationalism and feminism. In this article, Heng tries to show how the triumphant nature of nationalism subjugates the role of feminism in any movement. The triumphant nature of nationalism which is mostly patriarchal in nature subjugates the role of women’s contribution to any National Movement. In *The Shadow Lines* we find out how Thamma’s desire to fight for the cause of freedom is curtailed at the expense of patriarchy. In “Des Kothay? Amitav Ghosh Tells Old Wives Tales”, Anjali Gera (2003) signals out Amitav Ghosh’s effort to come out of the European dominant discourse with a new kind of discourse that depicts often unforgotten incidents of Indian history.

Amitav Ghosh is one of the celebrated authors from India who writes in English. He was born in Kolkata on 11 July, 1956. He has received appreciations for *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *An Antique Land* (1992), *The Glass Palace* (2001) and *The Hungry Tide* (2005). His most recent book is *Rivers of Smoke* (2011). By reading four of his novels, I have come to realize that Ghosh brings in characters from all corners of the world and juxtaposes them remarkably well. In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh creates a romantic story by mingling the life of the poor fisherman Fokir and Piya, an American of South Indian descent. He also depicts the life of the Sundarbans and the massacre of Morichjhanpi in 1978-79 in this novel. At that time, the rulers of West Bengal forced Bengali refugees to leave the Indian border by viciously killing them at times. Ghosh

shows his versatility in *The Glass Palace*. He narrates incidents of the Second World War from his characters' points of view. In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh also shows his historical prowess when he creates a fictive story out of the late Indian king who lived an exilic life in Burma.

Many people rate *The Shadow Lines* as one of the best novels written by an Indian in English. It is also one of the most challenging novels to analyze. It is also true that Amitav Ghosh makes familiar things even more familiar in this novel. He portrays each character of this novel brilliantly and shows how war and other political incidents have changed their lives. Readers feel attached to the plot of this novel because of its universal emotions that do unite the experience of quiet a few people. Many readers will come to know more about the 1964 communal riots by reading this novel. Ghosh's depiction of those incidents through the voice of his narrator brings those incidents to the fore once again. .

At the end, I would say that Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is a fascinating novel to read and analyze. As a student, I have thoroughly enjoyed working on this novel. Ghosh's style of narration has captivated me and made me analyze the novel carefully and with great pleasure. It has also given me plenty of knowledge about the turbulent political situation of the time.



## Chapter 1

### *The Shadow Lines and Nationalism*

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* was published in 1988. It is one of the most popular Indian novels in English. The novel depicts the story of three generations of the narrator's family and its action is spread over Dhaka, Calcutta and London. The novel was written against the backdrop of the Second World War, the partition of India, and communal strife in East Bengal and Kolkata during 1964. This chapter will attempt to analyze the political conflicts in *The Shadow Lines*. It will also attempt to underscore Ghosh's views on the false dawn of nationalism and its effect on some characters of this novel.

*The Shadow Lines* is a political novel. The feeling of nationalism is prominent throughout the novel. According to Kapadia (1990), '*The Shadow Lines* focuses mostly on the meaning and nuances of political freedom in contemporary life'.(123) In order to gain political freedom, Tha'mma, one of the central characters of *The Shadow Lines*, pledges to take an active part against the British Empire during the struggle for the independence of India. When asked by the narrator what she would have done if she had the option of killing the English magistrate, Tha'mma replies, "I would have been frightened....But I would have prayed for strength, and God willing, yes, I would have killed him. It was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free."(39). Tha'mma is a nationalist. She seeks freedom anyhow.

Tha'mma is a major character in *The Shadow Lines*. She is a "modern middle class woman" according to Tridib. Tha'mma was born in 1902 in "a big joint family, with everyone living and eating together" (121). While she is in college doing her BA in History in Dhaka, she comes to know about the "terrorist movements" amongst Bengal nationalists. She starts getting

some ideas “about the secret terrorist societies like Anushilan and Jugantar and all their offshoots, their clandestine networks, and the home-made bombs with which they tried to assassinate British officials and policemen; and a little about the arrests, deportations and executions with which the British had retaliated.”(37). One day policemen raid a class when a lecture is going on to catch a “shy young man” accused of killing an English Magistrate in Khulna. It is revealed later that he is a part of a secret “terrorist movement”. The young man inspires Tha'mma. She wants to be a part of the Indian National Movement and do everything in her power to liberate India. Tha'mma runs secret errands for aspirant nationalists and even cooks food for them. Tha'mma's receives a setback when she is widowed with a son at the age of thirty-two. She shows her gutsiness by raising her son single-handedly in a patriarchal society. Moreover, she takes up work as a school teacher. She starts life as a tenant in one-room apartment in Calcutta. Without seeking help from anyone, Tha'mma displays her guts by raising her child who later becomes a general manager in a private firm and moves his family to a new house on Southen Avenue, opposite the Lake with “rooms upstairs, rooms downstairs, verandas, a garden as well as a roof big enough to play cricket on”(119). Tha'mma returns to Dhaka to meet her Jethamoshai in 1964. She finds Dhaka to be a completely different city. She is not able to relate to many things she had left behind in Dhaka. Her nationalistic feeling is shaken, however, after the death of Tridib, which is the climax of the political theme of the novel (Kapadia, 1990). In *The Shadow Lines*, political events change many peoples' fortunes.

In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator questions the ideology of nationalism. Religious Nationalism led to communal strife during partition. Both Hindus and Muslims fought against each other then and many died while crossing the borders created by the leaders of India and newly formed Pakistan. Tha'mma's nationalistic feelings inflame her. Her patriotism was

reinvigorated when she found her shy classmate showing his bravery in attempting to plot the downfall of an English Magistrate in Khulna although he was nabbed by the British police who put him under the line of fire for his involvement in the murder of an English magistrate.

Ghosh seems to be implying that many innocent people die in nationalist movements because of various reasons. People fight for the nation. They want to secure a spot for their respective nations on the global map by fighting for their rights. In Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, we see that Tha'mma's notion of the nation and nationalism contributes to the murder of Tridib.

Tha'mma reminds one of the obstinate neighbours in Robert Frost's famous poem, "Mending Wall".

He moves in darkness as it seems to me~  
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.  
He will not go behind his father's saying,  
And he likes having thought of it so well."

He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors. ("Mending Wall", Frost, Robert 1953).

In Robert Frost's poem, "Mending Wall", the narrator keeps insisting to the obstinate neighbour that 'Something there is that doesn't love a wall', but the neighbour seems to pay no heed to this saying. He remains obdurate, insisting that the separation of land is better than living without a fence. Similarly, *In Shadow Lines*, Tha'mma looks to avenge her enemies at any cost for protecting her country from all evils. However, in the end, Tha'mma is treated as a foreigner in the place of her birth. It is a demoralizing for Tha'mma who considers Dhaka her *desh* or country. Tridib's murder in Dhaka just adds more pain to her woes.

Tha'mma cannot come to terms with the changing political scenario in post-British era. She is still trapped in her pre-national spatial identity' (Anjali, 2003). She is not aware of the definition of 'the modern border' which is 'political but real', according to her son. She now finds the freedom of the post-independent period to be contradictory to her idealistic notions of life without borders. Grandma cannot believe that she has to write Dhaka as her place of birth and India as her nationality in the passport fill up the form. She cannot understand why her place of birth has to be differentiated from her nationality. Grandma lives a 'middle class life in which, like the middle class the world over, she would thrive believing in the unity of nationhood and territory, of self-respect and national power' (119). She fails to come to terms with a 'new world order' where borders are marked by passports, and not by trenches. Tha'mma visits Dhaka not only to visit her old home but also to bring her uncle back to India. Before returning to Dhaka for a short stay, she dreams of seeing the old Dhaka that she knew in her childhood. But she does not realize that the Dhaka she had left behind and the Dhaka she has seen in her return visit to her homeland are not the same. She cannot understand why her place of birth has come "to be messily at odds with her nationality" (152). Anjali (2003) adds,

Tha'mma's search for the pre-partition Dhaka of her childhood and youth is projected as nostalgia for home. Tha'mma's attempt to identify herself as a native Dhakaian from the older parts of the city, who is contemptuous of the alien inhabitants of the new residential localities, records her amnesia in relation to her new Indian identity when confronted with more compelling claims of an older solidarity.( 110)

Anjali (2003) seems to have referred to Tha'mma's state of mind during her second visit to Dhaka. Tha'mma tries her best to find old glimpses of Dhaka then. She cannot come to terms with the changing world. She is an Indian and not a resident of East Bengal anymore. Her

homecoming also leads to a sudden twist of fate. Tha'mma could never expect Tridib to fall victim to the communal riots of 1964. She has no sense of the political animosity between India and Pakistan. The loss of the prophet's hair in Hazratbal in 1964 had seen rumour and violence spread over India and Pakistan. Tha'mma had no way of knowing that Tridib would be murdered in her beloved Dhaka. She had tried unsuccessfully to affiliate herself with her homeland. The same people whom she thought of as friends turn out to be her enemies.

People of different nations are separated by boundaries. Borderland disputes are created by people. Mee (2003) observes, "the identities for which the people have spilled their blood are shifting, affected by the aspirations of the people themselves, and that boundaries are capable of being redrawn." (95). There is no fixed identity. Dhaka was Thamma's own country before the partition. Tha'mma's return to her birthplace was not a pleasant experience. Each of her travel companions was treated as foreigners even though Tha'mma thought Dhaka to be her home, albeit one away from another home in India. Reality was too harsh on them. Each of them had to fill in the passport forms to collect visas for visiting Tha'mma's uncle living in "East Pakistan". During the reign of the British Empire there were no separate boundaries between the subcontinent nations. There was only one country, "India" to define the whole subcontinent. Partition brought a change to the overall scenario. Constant changes in international politics on or before the Partition led to maps being redrawn and also they brought changes in peoples' aspirations, objectives and expectations from their newly established country.

The logic behind Partition still vexes many people. Many people try to rationalize the reason behind this event. Everyone has their own viewpoints regarding the Partition of India. Many still support the separation of India. However, in *The Shadow Lines*, Tridib shows no concern about politics. He is seen busier with national and international geographic channels of

the world. We do not see him sharing his ideas about the Partition. On the other hand, characters like the narrator's parents have taken the separation of India as a normal course of life. They are not overwhelmed by the changes in politics. They treat everyday as it comes. However, Tha'mma does not understand the reason behind partition. She is stuck in her past. She always takes great pride in her nationalistic feeling without understanding the ways of the changing world. In her return visit to her homeland seventeen years after she had left Dhaka in 1947, Tha'mma 'comes to know that border does not mean a solid wall put between two countries'.(Alam, 2008). Tha'mma exclaims

If there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? ... what was it all for then --- partition and all the killing and everything--- if there isn't something in between?"

Tha'mma's son tries to erase her confusion regarding the changing political scenario. He explains to her that a boundary epitomizes 'authoritative control' (Alam, 2008) and not 'physical geographical control' (*ibid*: 159). He says, 'The border isn't on the frontier: it's right inside the airport' (*TSL 151-2*). Tha'mma is distraught when she hears that she has to collect a visa to go to Dhaka. Before the partition, she 'could come home to Dhaka whenever I wanted' (152). She always feels proud of her Indian identity. She wants to bring her uncle back to India in order to make him feel more comfortable in familiar surroundings. Mee (2003) observes,

the grandmother's very desire for national tidiness, for firm boundaries operating to guarantee a sense of self-presence, the desire to bring her family home to India, starts to unravel her faith in the stability of national identities" (95)

Tha'mma's attempt to take her uncle back to India, however, ends in a fiasco. Her own uncle, her nephew and Khalil, the rickshaw puller, are all killed in a riot.

Ghosh's search for "the little stories of small places (Gera, 2003: 110) in family chronicles and neighbourhood yarns makes him dig up histories buried and forgotten under the edifice of nationalism. Gera (2003) observes that Ghosh's novel examines the relevance of nationalism's concern with geographical restoration in the context of a new borderless, global landscape (111). Ghosh tries to go past the dominant Eurocentric discourse with a view to retelling the events of 1964 in order to give voices to those people who are never heard in mainstream history. Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* attempts to explore the almost forgotten incidents of the 1964 riots that took place in Kolkata and Khulna. He tries to throw light on the often ignored events of that year. They would have been forgotten to many if Ghosh had decided not to historicize that turbulent period. The narrator of *The Shadow Lines* himself could not gather first-hand knowledge about that incident. He had to leaf through many newspapers to discover the truth of the events of that period.

Tha'mma's feelings of nationalism are related to her idealistic views about self-esteem and the importance of national power. She does not like Ila's decision of staying in England. Tha'mma thinks only the British have earned the right to live in England because "It took those people a long time to build that country...years of years of war and bloodshed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood...War is their religion. That's what it takes to make a country."(S.L:77-78). Nationalism, the product of those times, carries for her the creed of religion, and informs her thoughts and deeds (Bhaduri, 1991:107). That is why, the English can enjoy the privilege guaranteed by their country. She feels that Indians have no right to live there and enjoy the facilities that they have not earned. Similarly, Tha'mma's uncle does not

believe in displacement. He does not want to see himself in India. Tha'mma fails to change his mind. When she requests her uncle to leave his house for a better life in India, he makes a scathing attack on the notion of nationhood and nationalism. He says,

“I don't believe in India-Shindia..... I was born here and I'll die here”(215).

Tha'mma's uncle's remark indicates the resentment of people of the subcontinent suffering because of the decisions taken by Jinnah and Nehru on the basis of “Two Nation Theory” which led to conflicts and the struggle for power caused by political and economical self-interests. Tha'mma's uncle does not have any trust in politics. He does not want to shift to a new country to lead the life of an exile.

Ghosh depicts the politics of maps in subtle ways. In Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator compares the drawing of boundaries with the game of houses which Ila commands her young cousin to play through a willing suspension of disbelief. Ila says, ‘Don't you understand? I've just rearranged things a little. If we pretend it's a house, it'll be a house’. Similarly, ‘rearrangement’ and ‘pretension’ are key words for the birth of nations. Most nations are created out of rearrangement, illusion and disillusion. The birth of a nation depends on the fixing of boundaries. A new nation is born out of the destruction and reconstruction of old boundaries. According to Gera (2003),

Ghosh uncovers the same strategy of ‘rearrangement’ and ‘pretense’ in the birth of nations, which he extends to the very process of the construction of reality.  
(116)

The notion of freedom is intermittently discussed in *The Shadow Lines*. Almost everyone is seen doing something to be free. However, the concept of freedom varies from person to person.



Tha'mma's believes in gaining freedom at any cost. A riot takes away the life of her innocent nephew Tridib. She is left with huge despair after the assassination of Tridib and her uncle. Tha'mma's friends turn out to be her enemies. After the incident, Tha'mma tells the narrator: "I gave the chain to the fund for the war....For your sake, for your freedom. We have to kill them before they kill us: we have to wipe them out."(237).

On the other hand, Ila has a different notion of freedom. Though born an Indian, Ila opts to be English. She seeks freedom of a different kind. She likes leading a life without restrictions. She has an Indian body but a British mindset. She picks up a fight against Robi when she is warned by her brother not to dance with other men at a party. However, Ila cannot lead life as freely as she wants to. Her overwhelming passion for Nick curbs her desire to lead a free life. Ila's freedom is restricted after she gets married to Nick. She has to worry about Nick's alleged extra-marital affair with another woman. Ila fails to detach herself from Nick. Because of her devotion towards Nick, Ila at one point prevents the narrator from developing a relationship with her. She is restricted by her own chores. Nick uses her as an object. Ila has a sacrificing nature. She tries every means at her disposal to keep the relationship with Nick intact. At the end of the novel, readers see her inability to attain the kind of freedom she had always desired. She marries the same Nick who let her get beaten by a racist gang from his class. She is also jealous of Magda, the white doll. Ila belongs to those kinds of people who believe that everything white is beautiful. Speaking of Ila, N, Eakambaram (1990) says, 'She (Ila) seems to be the kind of person who is not attached to any particular place' (101).

Tridib is one of the most attractive characters of *The Shadow Lines*. He is a charismatic figure who helps expand the horizon of the narrator, giving him "worlds to travel in" and "eyes to see them with". Tridib teaches the narrator to 'imagine with precision' (34). He is a

renaissance man. His knowledge knows no bounds. He is a romantic by heart. Tridib's knowledge of English places (despite the changing shift of events, construction and reconstruction of places that contradicted Tridib's knowledge of places with the narrator's expectations) helps the narrator to find many places similar to his uncle's description while he is pursuing his doctoral studies. As the narrator notes: "despite the clear testimony of my eyes it seemed to me still that Tridib had shown something truer about Solent Road a long time ago in Calcutta".(57). Tridib believes in cosmopolitanism. He is 'happiest in neutral, impersonal places--coffee houses, bars, street corner adda --the sort of place where people come, talk and go away without expecting to know each other any further'(9). He has a positive attitude towards life. He hates people who 'sink to the bottom of the sea of heartbreak when they lose sight of the herd' (18). Tridib likes the story of 'a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman across-the seas' (186). He has an affair with May, a lady who lives in faraway England. We are told in his correspondence with May that he desires 'to meet as the completest of strangers ---strangers-across-the seas -- all the more strangers because they knew each other already...in a place without a past, without history, free, really free, two people coming together with the utter freedom of strangers'(144). Tridib comes across as someone who swims across the frontier with his storehouse of knowledge. Unfortunately, the destruction of fratricidal politics of the subcontinent kills his life.

Politics gets murkier when there is violence involved. It is hard to tone down the scale of violence within a short span of time. People run amok at the time of violence. Many people get killed because of the violence which has a detrimental effect on children's mindsets. In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator recounts his own experience of violence during the 1964 communal riots which led to the closing down of many schools and the police baton charging rioters in

Calcutta and Khulna. The day when Tridib is murdered in Khulna, the narrator himself, goes through a traumatic experience in Calcutta as 'the streets had turned themselves inside out' and 'the city' (164) seemed to have 'turned against all school children'(164), One of the narrator's school friends, Tublu cried all the way for 'all of us'(164). Everyone gathered around Tublu to console him. There was complete silence around everyone. The narrator compares the fear that he had experienced then with an earthquake. However the fear they faced, the narrator believes, was beyond comparison. The narrator remembers his school mates starting to empty water bottles, fearing that they were poisoned. Moreover, mobs threw stones, pebbles and brickbats at school buses. While speaking of the tumultuous period, the narrator recollects how fear gripped the school children.

“It is a fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets one inhabits, can become, suddenly and without warning, as hostile as a desert in a flash flood.” (204).

Fear grips everyone when there is violence involved. When violence is raging, everyone fears that something ominous is going to happen. The spreading of rumour also adds fuel to the fire. As a result of the impending nature of violence and the spread of rumour, everything becomes very chaotic. Amitav Ghosh stresses that due to social conditioning, the role of rumour in riots or mass movements can become deeply rooted.(Kapadia, 1990). The main cause of communal riots in the novel was the stealing of the prophet's hair, which was caused by a rumour that had no connection with reality. But Hindus and Muslims fought against each other on that basis of that rumour. By leafing through newspapers, the narrator found out that the real reason of riots was rumour.

In Calcutta rumours were in the air – especially that familiar old rumour, the harbinger of every serious riot – that the trains from Pakistan were arriving packed with corpses...with refugees still pouring in, rumours began to flow like floodwaters through the city and angry crowds began to gather at the stations. (*The Shadow Lines*, 229).

Rao (1994) observes that “the communal riots follow their own ‘grotesque logic’ (229) fed by rumours, devoid of humanity, as is evidenced at frequent intervals in the life of people living in the subcontinent since the Indian independence. The carnage let loose on such occasions is beyond description” (136). The riots erupt all of a sudden. There is no ‘hint of augury’ before the impending carnage takes place. May’s recollection about the tragic death of Tridib epitomizes the scale of violence she experiences, “When I got there, I saw three bodies. There were all dead. They’d cut Khalil’s stomach open. The old man’s head had been hacked off. And they’d cut Tridib’s throat, from ear to ear” (151).

The narrator criticizes states, leaders and politicians who take no measures to stop the murder of innocent civilians. In fact, politicians are never bothered about the number of casualties during mob violence. A government is only interested in toning down the scale of violence by ordering the armed forces to kill anyone who distracts law and order. The armed forces only follow their superiors’ command. They kill violators. According to Rao (1994), “the measure of government’s success or failure depends on the number of deaths that occur. When only a few people get killed, governments have no use for them”. It is true that only a few people got killed in the 1964 communal strife, but there is no significant record of the number of casualties. As a result of insufficient data, many people do not have any idea about the scale of violence that occurred during the 1964 communal strife. While leafing through past newspaper

records, the narrator found no accounts of the 1964 riots of East Pakistan in a leading Kolkata newspaper, which is “run by people who believed in the power of distance’ (138) and they also believed that shadow lines that are drawn to divide countries, regional borders, and ‘make good fences’ to ‘make good neighbours’ have a kind of absolute reality. The narrator says:

Every word I write about those events of 1964 is the product of a struggle with silence I do not know where within me, in which corner of my world, this silence lies. ... (218)

*The Shadow Lines* depicts a riot occurred between ordinary Muslims and Hindus. Not many newspapers gave this incident the kind of treatment it deserved. It was almost excluded from public records. In *The Shadow Lines*, we find the impact of violence in Khulna where “some shops were burnt down and a few people killed” (227). Riots did spread from Khulna to Dhaka. In one rioting incident almost “fourteen” people died “in frenzy off Khulna” (228). However, nothing significant happened in Kashmir. In newspaper reports, “there was not one single recorded incident of animosity between Kashmiri Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs” (225). Instead of spreading violence, Maulana Masoodi ‘persuaded the first demonstrators to march with black flags instead of green and thereby drew the various communities of Kashmir together in a collective display of mourning’(226). This indicates that astute leadership can stop violence from rearing its ugly head, and can metamorphose people of different sects into a united group.

The Second World War and partition displaced many people. In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator’s family escapes from Dhaka to Calcutta during partition. In Calcutta, they got close with the Price family. The two families share a lot of memories. Tridib, the narrator’s uncle, went to England for a short period and lived with the Prices during the Second World War. Apparently, the narrator started to depict incidents of his life soon after attaining his PhD in

England. *The Shadow Lines* is about passages to and from England and India. Cross-cultural interaction and displacements occur because of partition and the Second World War with many victims resettling in a new land.

Partition traumatized the entire sub-continent. The religious conflicts left a sour taste on people's mouth. The sense of camaraderie that Indian Muslims and Hindus once had took a vicious turn after partition. Both India and Pakistan became antagonistic to each other after 1947. Communal frenzy ended the rapport that people of different religious sects had forged. It put an abrupt end to the shared communal history and culture.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is without a doubt one of the greatest works of Indian literature in English. It is a novel which delineates almost every major issue related to the recent history of the subcontinent. It is especially memorable for the way it delineates often forgotten political events by bringing in characters from each period. In this novel, we find Tha'mma as an avid nationalist; Tridib, a universalist; Ila, a globalist; the narrator's mother, a subservient wife; Robi, a repressed nationalist, and the narrator, an innocent witness to the political conflict of the time. The narrator was not born when the Second World War and partition had taken place. He was very young during the communal strife of 1964. As a result, he could not have known the exact reason behind Tridib's murder. His father resolves the mystery behind Tridib's murder when the narrator grows older. In spite of being ignorant of such political incidents of the subcontinent, the narrator retraces the 'story behind a story' ---which gives his listeners the chance to know what actually happens through everyone's life when there is violence involved.

## Chapter 2

### Criticism of Nationalism in *The Shadow Lines*

In the previous chapter, I discussed *The Shadow Lines* in the light of partition, the communal strife of 1964, Tridib's murder, Tha'mma's futile nationalist feeling and Ila's freedom, or lack of it. In this chapter, I intend to discuss the criticism of nationalism in *The Shadow Lines*. In this part of my discussion, I also intend to put forth Rabindranath's idea about Nationalism. In my discussion, I will explain how Rabindranath and Ghosh articulate similar feelings when the question of humanity comes. At the same time, I intend to discuss Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* in light of recent ideas about nationalism and feminism. I also want to investigate why the role of women is often ignored during the struggle for independence. Finally, I will focus on the representation of women after partition in the pages of the novel.

Nationalism is "notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyze, nation, nationality, nationalism" (Benedict, 1991). According to Tagore (1916), nationalism takes place because of "the organized self-interest of a people where it is least human and least spiritual" ("Nationalism", 8). Rabindranath Tagore and Amitav Ghosh believe in universal identity that has no borderlines. Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* shows the futility of nationalism in the global world order. Tagore castigates nationalism in the same vein. Nationalism, to him, is a "cruel epidemic of evil ...sweeping over the human world of the present age and eating into its moral fibre" ("Nationalism" 9). Tagore was humanitarian and internationalist in outlook. According to him, the world will never see the sunlight of humanity as long as people shed blood for the ownership of one's own country. Tagore observes,

The nation is the greatest evil for the nation, that all its precautions are against it, and any new birth of its fellow in the world is always followed in its mind by the dread of a new peril (*Nationalism 17-18*)

What would have happened if there was only one nation in the sub-continent? Was partition the real need of that time? Did partition bring peace and harmony into the subcontinent? There questions always vex almost everyone. The antagonistic political situation of the second half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have led to constant turn of events and breakdown of relationships because of religious and political conflicts. Similarly, In *The Shadow Lines*, pre-partition friends became enemies in the post-partition era. A Mob in Pakistan killed Tridib because of a religious conflict in Dhaka, a part of India before partition. In the post-partition era, India and Pakistan fought three wars in (1965, 1971) and the Kargil war in 1999. As a result of partition, India and Pakistan broke off relationships.

*The Shadow Lines* is a political novel. In it, Ghosh depicted the history of partition and communal riots in subtle ways. Ghosh's call for humanity also reflects Gandhi's doctrine. Gandhi promulgated the concepts of "non-violence" and "civil resistance" during the Indian National Movement. He borrowed these ideas from the American poet Henry David Thoreau (1812-76) who initiated the concept of "civil disobedience" which was meant to develop resistance through non-violent activities; e.g., not paying taxes. In his autobiography, *The Story of my Experiments with Truth*, Gandhi gives his account of life in every way possible. He keeps himself accountable to all. By reading his autobiography, readers come to know about Gandhi's role in every walk of life. In his autobiography, Gandhi explains how he transformed himself from a willing colonial subject into a man opposed to all colonial establishments after the South-African apartheid authority had rejected him from traveling on a first class train compartment



because of his colour and race. After returning home, Gandhi rallied his supporters by championing the cause of non-violence and urging civil resistance against the authoritarian rule of the British Emperor. However, Gandhi's plea for non-violence, peace and harmony during the breakaway of India could not convince his fellow colleagues and countrymen because of their vitriolic desire for the segregation of India which vanquished Gandhi's dream of one nation having one universal identity.

On the eve of partition, Gandhi urged his supporters to maintain harmony between different sects. He pleaded to everyone not to kill one another. Gandhi declared, "It has been easier to destroy than to create" (qtd in Glassman, 2008). He criticized the call for the segregation of India. In his book, Gandhi wonders out aloud:

"What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans, and the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or the holy name of liberty and democracy?"

In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh also echoes Gandhi's view about peace and universal solidarity and shows how these can easily be destroyed by war and violence. In each of his novels, Ghosh critiques people who are aggressive. Like Gandhi, Ghosh castigates violent territorial battles fought for the creation of new states in the world.

### **Ignorance of Women's Contribution during National Movements**

The ignorance of women's contribution during the national movement is also a major criticism against nationalism. The relationship between the third world feminism and nationalism is a complicated one. In "A Great Way to Fly", Heng (1997) depicts the beginning of third world feminism which joined hands with nationalist, anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggles.

He notes that the rise of third world feminism has coincided with the proliferating number of anti-imperialistic-struggles in the pre-post partition era, (Heng, 1997). He further says that 'third world feminism' is a 'hydra-headed creature'(861) that survives in 'a plethora of lives and guises'(861). Feminism or Third World Feminism has taken different shapes in course of time. As he observes, 'Third-World feminism by virtue of its vexed historical origins and complicated negotiations with contemporary state apparatuses, is necessarily a chimerical, hydra-headed creature, surviving in a plethora of lives and guises'. (Heng,1997).While reflecting on the connecting history between nationalism and the Third World Feminism, Heng notes that the rise of the Third World Feminism also has much to do with the ascendancy of national movements and anti-colonial struggles in the subcontinent during the Indian struggle for Independence. Heng observes,

Historically, almost without exception, feminism has arisen in the Third World in tandem with nationalist movements – whether in the form of anti-colonial-anti imperialist struggles, national modernization and reform movements, or religious nationalist cultural-national revivalisms. Heng (1997).

Nationalism is patriarchal in nature. Though men took active part in the India nationalist struggle against the British Empire, a few women defied all odds and also participated actively, often through demonstrations. Tha'mma recalls that she wanted to work for Indian nationalists, but she 'didn't know how to get in touch with them, and even if she had it would be twice as hard for her to get in, because she was a girl, a woman'(39). In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator depicts the struggle of Tha'mma in Kolkata as a single mother. Even if Tha'mma had wanted to take part in the national movement, she could not have actively participated in it because of her household chores. She struggled not only as a single mother but also as a teacher in a school at a time when

the idea of girls working outside the home could hardly be imagined. On the other hand, she resisted the idea of British rule from her heart. In order to aid the nationalists, Tha'mma longed to embody the "new woman's" outlook. She bore the expenses of her small family, taught at a school, and helped the nationalist cause by cooking food even though she did not enjoy cooking. Despite her concern for the national movement, Tha'mma could not defy the patriarchal world order and go all the way to do whatever she wanted to aid the nationalists.

Heng (1997) notes that the triumph of nationalism allows national leaders to take credit for much of the gains made through it without showing enough respect for the contributions of women to the national movement. She comments on the problematic relationship between nationalism and feminism. She also stresses on the intermingling of Nationalism, third world feminism and westernization. On the other hand, while talking about the relationship between Third World Feminism and Nationalism, another author, Gera, (2003) observes, 'Nationalism always had an uneasy status with Third World feminism' (109). In a national movement, men and women take part actively to bring the lost glory back to their country. However, national movements seem to be patriarchal in nature. As a result, the contribution of women during the national struggle for independence is minimized by nationalist male leaders. Despite women's involvement in numerous national movements, we do not see a significant number of historical documents that highlight women's participation in anti-colonial struggles against British Colonial rule. Not many people know about the contribution of women during the Indian National Movement because of a lack of documentation. There are a couple of women who always come to the forefront when discussions are held about the role of women during the Indian national movement. One of them is Pritilata Waddedar who planned an attack on the Pahartali European Club. Despite a successful raid, Waddeder could not escape. She committed

suicide in order to avoid custody. There were also other women who sacrificed as much as Pritilata did. Because of insufficient data, later generation readers do not know much about other female nationalists. The rise of feminist movements has shown how the contribution of women is hugely neglected in a national movement. According to Geraldine, Third-World feminism has been especially liable to manipulation by nationalists for its symbolizing potential... ( 884).

The contestatory nature of the relationship on the subject both at the historical origin of feminism and nationalism and today, is also inadvertently the record of a triumphant nationalism that makes its gains and wins its accomplishments at the expense of a subordinated feminism. ( "A Great Way to Fly: 862)

In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh does a splendid work by discussing the often ignored issues. He depicts the role of Tha'mma brilliantly in the course of this novel. At the same time, Ghosh shows why Tha'mma could not actively take part in the nationalist movement. The narrator gives a different picture in his depiction of Ila who does not like brooding over the history of partition. The narrator says, "“For Ila the current was the real: it was though she lived in a present which was like an airlock in a canal, shut away from the tidewaters of the past and the future by steel floodgates”(16). Ila wrongly thinks that she leads a free life. She also has no real fascination for her Indian roots. The narrator also criticizes Ila's lifestyle and her way of thinking. The narrator says,

Ila lived so intensely in the present... whereas with her, when she spoke of her last lover's legs, the words had nothing to do with an excitement stored in her senses, but were just a string of words that she would remember while they sounded funny and then forget as completely as she had the lover and his legs. (30)

Ila is the product of a globalizing world. Although she longs for freedom, her concept of freedom is not as revolutionary as Tha'mma's. Ila shows her revolutionary instincts through her action. However, she fails to come out of her femininity when she has to take a firm decision about Nick, her husband, who has a relationship with another woman. Ila acts in radical plays and actively takes part in many processions demanding justice and equality for all, but she cannot do justice to her own talent in the way many expect of her. She becomes a subject to the will of Nick, and submits to patriarchal order at the end. On the other hand, Tha'mma maintains her personality and assured identity from beginning till the end. She is a respected school headmistress. Her colleagues and students bid her an emotional farewell in the last day of her school. During her working days, Tha'mma does not get enough support from the patriarchal social structure. Still, she tries her level best to keep her identity intact. On the other hand, Ila lives in a relatively liberal culture in the sense that she has not had to struggle hard for her identity in the same way Tha'mma has struggled all the way as a single mother. Ila's mind is deeply ingrained in the western way of thinking. But, she has a western body with an Indian mindset. At the end of the day, Ila cannot come out of the Indian conservative mentality. Despite knowing about Nick's extra-marital affair, she gives him another chance to mend himself. Ila is a confused girl without a certain future.

The discussion of this chapter, "The Criticism of Nationalism" gives us the proof that nationalism is a forlorn chapter in this era of globalization. Fighting over the territories of one nation is a kind of illusion people have kept in their brain. The world should move beyond that. There is no point in shedding blood for capturing the land of other nations. Each region nowadays is dependent on other nations so fighting over lands brings downfall to the relationship between different regions. Instead of souring the relationship every nation now looks for

strengthening the diplomatic ties for helping each country in dire straits and seek benefits from each of the regions during bad times. Ghosh, Rabindranath and Gandhi always championed peaceful solidarity between people. A harmonious relationship between each continent makes the world a better place to live in.

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