

Role of Partition in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

Dr. M .N Abhilash

Department of English, Yuvaraja's College, University of Mysore, Mysore.

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is on the problem of partition in the society. Today partition is a major problem in the World. The present study deals with the history and culture of India in the society. Despite the physical isolation, bondage, cultural displacement, immigration, exile, communalism, identity and uprooting. *The Shadow lines* is a story of communal clashes between two religions. It shows the partition between the two cities of Calcutta and Dhakha. This constitutes a logical background in the novel and it makes readers probe the various interwoven facets of violence. Also, his treatment of violence in Calcutta and Dhakha in this novel is relevant even to the present. The novel deals with the concerns of our period, the search for identity, the need for freedom, the difficult relationship with colonial culture. It is a continuous narrative which replicates the pattern of violence not only of 1964 but also in the 21st century. The fragmentary narratives unfold the narrator's experience in the form of memories which move backwards and forwards.

Keywords: *Communalism; identity; immigration; cultural displacement.*

Introduction

This paper focus on the dominance of Indian society to make a partition issues in the novel of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. Amitav Ghosh is a well-known name among the contemporary Indian writers in English; he has won many accolades to his credit and has been responsible for producing some of the most lyrical and insightful works on the effect of colonialism on the native people. Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* aims at bringing out their contributions to the cause of Indian society of cultural scenario in the countries of their nativity. The role of Partition analysis in Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* would provide an insight into the various aspects of communal divide and its consequences and aftermath on the process of dominance society in India.

While reading this text Mahesh Dattani's play *The Final solution* comes to our mind. Because in that play is also one can observe communal clashes. Hence what is the final solution to get rid of communal clashes is to maintain harmony among the people of the community. Harmony should be in terms of good understanding. One of the Indian writer Khwaja Ahmad Abbas written by prose *The Refugee*. It is a story of partition. Every person should try to give respect to one another's culture, tradition, customs and religion.

The Shadow Lines is also based on partition but it differs from both the novels and from many others, since *The Shadow Lines* tackles the complex and contentious issue of partition in a distinctly unique perspective. Ghosh shows that partition did not solve the ethnic conflicts and communal tensions in the sub-continent. Instead, in the second part of the novel, 'Coming Home', the author reveals how partition has repeatedly restructured the sources of conflict around borders, refugees and diasporas.

The story centres on Tribid the narrator's uncle. No less vivid and memorable are the portraits of the narrator's grandmother, his cousin Ila and an English girl, May Price. The novel creates a wonderful scene of relationship with Uncle and aunt interspersed easily in different locations-Calcutta, Dhaka and London chronologically presented. The story begins with the passage of time in colonial India when the narrator was not born. The year 1939 is historically

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significant for the outbreak of the Second World War and the upheaval caused by that epochal event. The story is woven around two families. The Datta-Chaudhuri's of Bengal and the Price's of London and the relationship which spans three generations.

The narrative begins in the year 1939 during the outbreak of The Second World War and ends in 1964 with the eruption of a train of riots in India and Pakistan. The action of the novel starts with tribes. The narrator's father's cousin then aged eight being taken to England in 1939. In 1964 he was lynched by a street mob near his mother's original family home in Dhaka. These two events constitute the end-points of the novel's narrative. May Prince, had begun a long correspondence with Tridib in 1959. At the time of Tridib's death May Price was on a visit to India.

The narrator's grandmother, Thamma is the central character in the novel born in 1902 at Dhaka, "she grew up as a member of 'a big joint family, with everyone living and eating together.'" (*The Shadow Lines*, 121) But when her grandfather died, the ancestral house had to be partitioned because of the strife that broke out between her father and her uncle. While at college for her B.A in History at Dhaka, she had known the terrorist movement amongst nationalists in Bengal. She had a romantic notion of terrorism and freedom but it went off like a bubble with her marriage. Her short married life, mostly lived in Burma, was punctuated by the birth of a son in 1925, and the unfortunate death of her husband in 1935 when she was just thirty-two. A new phase of life began in 1936 when she took up the job of a school-teacher in Calcutta. The big political events war the partition in 1947. Dhaka becoming the capital of East Pakistan, divided her from her native city. But these public events did not have a direct impact on her as much as the demands of her personal life. As a school-teacher, she educated her son on her own, declining the help of her rich sister. The son's employment in a private company, his marriage, the birth of the grandson in 1952, her own retirement in 1962 as the headmistress of the school are abbreviated and revealed in an oblique manner. The focus of the novel is on the grandmother from her retirement in 1962 until her death in 1965.

The heart of the novel is the death of Tridib. The trouble started when the sacred relic known as the Mu-i-Mubarak believed to be an heir of the Prophet Mohammed himself disappeared from its place on 27 December 1963 in the Hazratbal mosque near Srinagar, two hundred and sixty three years after it had been installed. While India was deeply agitated, Pakistan fanned the flames of communal passion, and spoke of 'genocide'. Fortunately Mu-i-Mubarak was 'recovered' on 4 January 1964 by the officials. The narrator is concerned with the impact of this event of life in Calcutta and Dhaka. Fear grips the thousand million Indians who inhabit the Indian subcontinent. The grandmother of the narrator visits Dhaka with her sister, May Price and Tridib at this crucial time. The climax takes place as the grandmother and her sister return in their Mercedes from their ancestral home and their uncle follows them in the rickshaw. When they come to the bazaar area, they find the shops closed and the street is deserted, but for stray people as if they were waiting for the car. In no time a lot of people surround the car, smash the windscreen and the driver suffers a cut across his face. At the same time, the eerie silence is broken by a creak, and the attention of the crowd turns to the sound of the rickshaw-Khalil's rickshaw with their uncle in it, and the people surround it. Though the sisters could have driven away, May Price and Tridib leave the car to save the old man and they get lost in the milling crowd. The mischief takes less than a moment and the crowd begins to melt away. The dead bodies of Khalil, the old man and Tridib lie on the road. Fifteen years later May Price and Robi recollect this incident and tell the narrator.

The theme is first sounded when in a conversation with the narrator in London in 1978 May Price shares her growing intimacy with Tridib:

Smiling at the memory, she told me how his card had reached her just when she was trying to get over an adolescent crush. On a school boy trombonist, who had no time for her at all and had not been overly delicate about making that clear. It was nice to feel that someone wanted to befriend her. She had written back, and after that they had written to each other regularly short, chatty letters, usually. Soon, pen-friendship, they had exchanged photographs. (*The Shadow Lines* 23)

Tridib realises May concretely and warmly in his imagination with all the attendant excitement stored in his senses. He can visualise her form and appearance precisely even without meeting her. Their love deep rooted; it crosses all borderlines and shadow-lines. The relationship between Tridib and May price is also suggestive of the cultural bond. Their relationship developed through correspondence transcending the shadow lines of nationality and cultural

boundary. Tridib had dreamt of “a better place, a place without borders and countries.” (*The Shadow Lines* 186) He was the happiest guy in the impersonal laces-coffee houses, street corners. Amitav Ghosh explores the mysterious pull between Tridib and May and the abiding intimacy between the two families, when the countries were pitted against each other. This search for invisible links ranging across the realities of nationality forms the theme of the novel. The narrator’s psyche absorbs cross-cultural interactions and sheds particularly of his origin and narrow nationalism fostered and stilled in him by his grandmother. Unlike Ila’s pragmatic cosmopolitanism, either lukewarm or lacking in vibrant reciprocity, the narrator learns the lesson of love and sacrifice untrammelled by exclusionary nationalism and spatial limits, first under the spiritual tutelage of Tridib, and later, in the warm embrace of May towards the close of the novel. He contrasts the perspectives of Ila and Tridib. Ila belongs to the new generation, which believes in internationalism. There are several lines of family introduced; that of the narrator, based in Calcutta; that of his grandmother’s sister, associated with Dhaka, and the two further lines bringing into the story, Robi and Ila.

He further explains to her “This is modern world.” The border isn’t on the frontier it is right inside the airport you’ll see. You’ll cross it when you have to fill in all those disembarkation cards and things.

The narrator’s grandmother thought this over for a while and said: But if there any trenches or anything how are people to Know? I mean where the difference then and if there is 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 is not something in between? (*The Shadow Lines* 151)

Subconsciously she rejected the historical act of partition by highlighting the fact that even after partition there might not be any “difference” between the two regions across the border. The novel questions the ideology of nationalism and the meaning of drawing lines between the countries.

Thamma initially keeps on asking “where is Dhaka,” but realises although reluctantly that nothing is upside down across the border on entering the part of their house that was one time across partition Mayadebi and grandmother began to laugh hugging each other nothing upside down said the grandmother. By stressing on identity rather than on the difference of the border the novel presents the futility of the border.

Thammas and Jethmosai who has been living with the refugees in Dhaka has a totally different view regarding partition. For him, Calcutta is a foreign city. He refuses to come with them. Senile and bedridden though Jethmosai, he has a better grasp of reality that geographical boundaries had become tenuous and fluid because of the political upheaval in India. The old man questions the whole ideology of nationalism which created boundaries and causes separation. He also raises pertinent questions on the concept of freedom and partition. That is what he tells his sons when they begin to move out of Dhaka. “Once you start moving you never stop, ‘he said, ‘I don’t believe in this India-Shindia. It is 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?” (*The Shadow Lines* 215)

What Jethmosai is suggesting expressions like ‘one’s home’, ‘one’s birth place’, ‘one’s country’ have lost the sense of fixity which was associated with them earlier. The senile and old Jethmosai seems more comfortable and calm with himself in his ancestral home than the narrator’s grandmother who has confused loyalties. By befriending the Muslims in his area and even giving them a place to stay in his huge mansion, the old man seems secure and content. By this was idea of inclusion rather than exclusion. The old man achieves a form of communal harmony and peace of mind that is denied to others of his generation like the grandmother. The narrator also, unable to comprehend the physical equivalents of division says:

They had drawn their borders, believing in that pattern, in the enchantment of the 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 pre-historic Gondwanaland. (*The Shadow Lines* 233)

The logic of the partition appears to be arbitrary. The lines that divide India from East Pakistan are as illogical as the lines of the circle, the narrator draws on the map with the help of his compass and pencil. These lines are merely the whims of the politicians and nothing else as they cannot enforce the cultural differences nor can they separate the

two communities living across the border. Something or the other always connects India to East Pakistan and Calcutta to Dhaka. No wonder the grandmother's old uncle refuses to leave Dhaka. This apparently senile and old man seems to come forward as the sanest voice in the novel.

Conclusion

Thus, the Ghosh has questioned whether the partition is a solution to the problems of social unrest, on religious grounds or on political motivation. Undoubtedly it creates the feeling of humiliation and distress for the dear and near one's heart that are compelled to migrate from their home or birth-place merely because of an unexpected change in the political scenario and to solve that problem faced by the nation.

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