



NATIONALISM IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES*

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ABSTRACT

Nationalism is the belief that our own country is better than all others. Sometimes nationalism makes people disinterested to work with other countries to solve problems.

Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta in 1956. He has received his PhD in social anthropology from Oxford. His famous novels are *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide*, *River of Smoke* and *The Shadow Lines*.

The shadow Lines was published in 2005. The Shadow Lines has been Amitav Ghosh's most popular novel. He has given importance to nationalism in this novel. The novelist focuses on the themes of Diaspora, Nationality, Internationality, cultural and Historical Self-determination.

The major theme of this novel is the understanding of the concept of the freedom. The novel weaves together the idea of freedom juxtaposing past and present, the personal and the public, the social and the political. Ranging across three generations and moving between two contrasting cultures, the narrative provides a penetrating study of freedom, as an important all-pervading force. The principal characters in *The Shadow Lines* reflect ideas in their own individualistic manner. Tha'mma, the grandmother, glorifies political freedom. Ila is in search of an elusive, personal, social and moral freedom. May and Tridib also strive for a quest that seems elusive. Political freedom is explored through the character of Tha'mma, the narrator's grandmother.

Keywords: Nationalism, The Shadow Lines, Freedom.

Nationalism is the belief that our own country is better than all others. Sometimes nationalism makes people disinterested to work with other countries to solve problems.

Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta in 1956. He grew up in East Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Iran and India. When he was a youngster, he heard the stories of partition, Independence and the Second World War. His mother grew up in Calcutta. Her memories were full of Mahatma Gandhi, non-violence and civil obedience. His mother narrated the story of Mahatma. In all the stories, Mahatma appeared as incomparably vital and endearing protagonist.

His father is a diplomat. He also narrated the stories of the Second World War about the Indian soldiers of the British Indian Army who fought against the Germans and the Japanese.

Amitav Ghosh has used these memories to construct the concept of freedom and its numerous connotations in the modern world, which is the dominant theme of *The Shadow Lines* by interweaving memory, history and contemporary life.

His famous novels are:

1. *The Circle of Reason* (1986)
2. *The Shadow Lines* (1988)
3. *In an Antique Land* (1992)
4. *The Calcutta Chromosome* (2001)
5. *The Hungry Tide* (2004)

The Circle of Reason, which received the prestigious award, Prix Medici Etrangere when translated into French, has been called an epic of restlessness.

The Shadow Lines, which received the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1989. It is considered by many critics as the best work of Indian fiction till date.

In an Antique land attempts to lend insight into both the ancient and modern convergences of the trio of cultures-Jewish, Arabic, and Hindu-on the history of the region.

The Calcutta Chromosome won the Arthur C. Clark Award for 1997.

The Hungry Tide has bagged the Hutch Crossword Book Award set up to promote good Indian Writing and Ghosh has been lauded as a potential Nobel Prize Winner for Literature for his contribution to Indian English fiction at the launch of *The Hungry Tide* in Delhi.

The Shadow Lines is in two parts- going away and coming home. It spans three generations of the narrator's family spread over Calcutta, Dhaka and London. The novel starts with a mention of Tridib and ends with unravelling the mystery of his violent death during communal riots in Dhaka. The story, told in the first person, is of a growing boy who lives in the shadow of Tridib, the man he idolises. Tridib, like Tha'mma, the narrator's grandmother, is pivotal to the narrative structure of the novel. The narrator's family consists of his grandmother

named Tha'mma, Mayadebi's elder sister and his parents. Maya debi and her diplomat husband (the shaheb) have three sons- Jatin, Tridib, Robi. Jatin's wife is Queen Victoria. His daughter is Ila. She is constantly travelling to various countries with her parents. Tridib, the only member of Maya debi's family lives in his ancestral house. Though Tha'mma considers him good for nothing, Tridib is doing his Ph.d in medieval archaeology of the Sena dynasty in Bengal.

Tridib saw May Price as a baby when he went to London with his parents in 1939 and they stayed with the Price. Tridib meets May Price again in Calcutta; the friendship has blossomed into love. This is central to the thematic concerns of *The Shadow Lines*. Robi accompanies Tridib, May, Tha'mma and Maya debi to bring Jethamoshai (grandmother's old uncle) from Dhaka to Calcutta. There they all witness the killing of Tridib by a communal mob. This is not described directly but later conveyed to the narrator as part of the haunting memories of both Robi and May Price.

Tha'mma, Mayadebi, Jethamoshi belong to the first generation. Jatin, Tridib, Robi, belong to the second generation. Ila and Nick belong to the third generation.

Tha'mma is the strict grandmother of the narrator. She is the pivot of the family and her word is law in the household. She is the elder sister of Tridib's mother Mayadebi. She stays in Calcutta's Gole Park, where she presides over her family- her son and daughter-in-law and their son, the narrator, who is greatly attached to her and who listens to her nostalgic stories of the life in Dhaka before partition. She considers Tridib to be a loafer and a wastrel. Tridib does not have proper work. He lives off his parent's money in the crumbling family mansion at Ballgunge place with his aging grandmother. Tha'mma does not like his behaviour, character, even though he likes to live in his ancestral house.

Tha'mma retired from her school job in 1962 when the narrator turned ten. The narrative returns to Calcutta and Dhaka. The narrator tries to understand the various nuances and meanings of political freedom acquired after partition and Independence. Partition was viewed as the Price of political freedom from the British rule and Nationalism thereafter changed its context from viewing people across the borders from purely communal perspectives as Hindus and Muslims. Families and friends, lovers and neighbours were now divided by the border fences on both sides.

Amitav Ghosh highlights the division of Bengal in this novel through the grandmother's nostalgic recollections of Dhaka, where she was born and brought up. She narrates, several anecdotes, including her husband's untimely death in the Arakan Hills and her efforts to become independent by taking up the job of a school mistress in Calcutta. She fondly remembers her Jethamoshai her husband's elder brother, who has chosen to stay back in Dhaka. Maya Debi's husband is posted in the Indian Deputy High Commission in Dhaka and she looks forward to going there and brings back her Jethamoshai. She is shocked to realise that her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality. And the Dhaka she visits bewilders her. It is no longer the Dhaka of her childhood.

The fate of Muslim refugees in the then East Pakistan is exemplified by the mechanic, Saiffuddin, he is originally from Motihari in Bihar and who also longs to go back there. Jethamoshai fails to recognise Tha'mma and Mayadebi, Tridib, Robi and May Price.

This is *The Shadow Lines* between sanity and dotage imagination and reality. Jethamoshai questions the very ideology of nationalism. He lives very comfortably, peacefully in his ancestral home than the narrator's grandmother who has confused loyalties. He has achieved sense of communal harmony by living with a rickshaw puller Khalil and his family. Khalil, his wife, the entire family takes care of Jethamoshai. In the old age, he has found a family to look after him. Jethamoshai prefers to die in his birth place (soil).

In the climax, communal hooligans chase the car in which Tha'mma, Mayadebi, Tridib, Robi, May Price are travelling back from the Khalil's house. They are surrounded by mob. Jethamoshai, Khalil and Tridib are killed. Mayprice and Robi are haunted by the horror of the situations.

Robi's point of view, that the concept of freedom becomes a mirage. They are witnessed of gruesome killing. Tha'mma is excited to hear on the radio the news of India fighting against Pakistan, which barely twenty years ago was her own country.

The novels move backwards and forward here, with the narrator recalling his youth and the grandmother's memories and the setting shifts back and forth from Calcutta to London to Dhaka. May, is safe because she is an English woman. She runs out of the car to save Khalil and UkilBabu (JethMoshai), But instinctively and unthinkingly. Tridib, weaponsless follows May remains unharmed. But in her vain attempt to save the other two. Tridib gets killed along with them.

Though the Dhaka of the grandmother's youth has changed the memory of her house becomes an image in her mind, important enough to live her. Most of the grandmother's vision is nostalgic. Her ancestral home in Dhaka has been occupied by Muslims after the partition. She feels no malevolence yet the novel recognizes the unquiet and the violent political disturbances of the times. The communal outbreak in 1964, in both India and Pakistan, leads to the untimely death of Tridib, an incident which changes the grandmother's perception.

Her home in Dhaka, filled with memories of lively experiences, now becomes a reminder of death and communal violence. The idyllic vision is shattered and the grandmother begins to think in terms of "us" and "them". The death of Tridib is the culmination of the political discourse in the novel.

The grandmother unveils and lays open to view an alarming. Probability that a sense of nationalism can only develop through the specific process of war and bloodshed. The inner urge that prompts her is a deep, imperative wish to be free, and so feelings of nationalism get linked to self-respect and national power. Ghosh prompts certain fundamental questions on imagination and reality. He seems, in fact, to indicate that there is only a shadow line between reality and imagination.

The narrator moves from India to England- from one real space to another perhaps in a quest for freedom-cultural, emotional and intellectual. Ila has travelled the world since she was a child but

has been unable to understand the words the narrator travels through Tridib. Ila journeys through real geographical spaces but none of them is her own.

In Ghosh's novel, imagination is not just a part of reality; it creates its own reality. Rumour can start a riot. It is seen in the novel that the story of the loss of the Prophet's hair (the Mu-i-Mubarak) in faraway Srinagar can lead to murderous attacks on India Hindus in Dhaka. Such is the impact of rumour that numerous people in Calcutta believe that the water supplies have been poisoned and friendships of many years are broken. Imagination is thus seen as a means to link people together. The physical fact of geographical boundaries between nations is not of real importance. The novel shows that the border drawn between the two Bengals has pulled them even close together. Events in Srinagar triggered off a riot in Dhaka and its aftermath had an immediate impact on Calcutta.

The role of rumour and imagination is also evident if we examine *The Shadow Lines* as a social document or a political novel. Written in 1988, when in India different cultures and communities were becoming antagonistic to a point of no return, Amitav Ghosh very sensitively handles the complexities of majority and minority violence.

Another major theme in this novel is the understanding of the concept of the freedom. The novel weaves together the idea of freedom juxtaposing past and present, the personal and the public, the social and the political. Ranging across three generations and moving between two contrasting cultures, the narrative provides a penetrating study of freedom, as an important all-pervading force. The principal characters in *The Shadow Lines* reflect ideas in their own individualistic manner. Tha'mma, the grandmother, glorifies political freedom. Ila is in search of an elusive, personal, social and moral freedom. May and Tridib also strive for a quest that seems elusive. Political freedom is explored through the character of Tha'mma, the narrator's grandmother.

Thus, the novel insists on the imperatives that assure empathy and unimpeded flow of friendship and mocks at the conception of militant nationalism, exclusive national pride and identity. A major incident in the novel, the outbreak of communal strife in Dhaka, following the disappearance of the prophet's hair in Srinagar, exposes the fragile demarcation of political frontiers. The message of the novel underlines the need of friendly ambience, for co-existence and humanitarian ties across cultures independent of political managers. The sanity, desire for peace and common-sense attitude of people beyond borders has the potential to ensure improved international relations and amity.

The narrator with his expanded horizons and imaginative understanding of a world shattered by violence stresses on the urgency of preserving the memories of saner and humane transactions. The author stresses that the media and the public memory must keep alive the indivisible sanity of communal violence. The meaning of political freedom in the modern world is shown as complex and without any easy solutions. In the novel Amitav Ghosh has shown that historically when different cultures and communities became antagonistic to each other, it led to major problems in Indian society and politics.

The title of the novel is symbolic of barriers and partitions. Individuals stand divided, as do families, nations and countries. Tridib who tried to teach the narrator to use his imagination with precision meets his death because of the violence of nationalism, ironically enough when he is trying to guard his friend, the English girl, from blind Hindu-Muslim hatred. Ghosh subtly suggests that shadow-lines divide, tear, embitter human beings; this artistically leads to the sudden revelation or joycan epiphany experienced by the narrator towards the end of the novel. It is a novel with a message and philosophy- this is unfolded in an intricately and colourfully woven piece of tapestry by a sensitivity and skilful artisan.

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