

Exploring Transnational Identity and Borders in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract

In contemporary Indian literature, post-independent writers grapple with the complexities of identity and nationhood amidst historical legacies such as partition, migration, displacement, and violence. These issues delve into the primal origins of people and their subsequent diasporic experiences, which challenge their cultural and societal identities. This paper aims

to delve into the theme of transcending national identity in Amitav Ghosh's novel, *The Shadow Lines*. Through the novel, Ghosh interrogates the construction of borders and national identities, probing the boundaries between people and the geographical landscapes they inhabit. Set against the backdrop of significant historical events like the freedom movement in Bengal, the Second World War, and the partition of India in 1947, the narrative spans three generations across three distinct cities—Calcutta, Dhaka, and London. The characters navigate diverse horizons, shaped by memories of traumatic historical events and nationalist struggles. Their journey from 'Going Away' to 'Coming Home' is marked by blurred lines between nations and families, symbolized as 'Shadow Lines,' transcending temporal and spatial borders in their diasporic experiences. Additionally, the paper delves into the intricacies of individual identity and the inner and outward conflicts arising from geographical dislocation and cultural disparities depicted in the novel.

Keywords – Identity, Nationalism, Culture, Migration, Border, Partition, Diaspora

Introduction

In the realm of contemporary Indian literature, the post-independence era has witnessed a profound exploration of themes revolving around identity, nationhood, and the intricate interplay between the two. Authors grapple with the enduring legacies of historical events such as partition, migration, displacement, and violence, seeking to unravel the complexities of human experience within the socio-political landscape of modern India. Among these literary endeavours, Amitav Ghosh's seminal work, *The Shadow Lines*, stands as a poignant reflection on the fluidity of identity and the porous nature of borders in an increasingly interconnected world as a global village.

Ghosh's novel traverses the realms of time and space, weaving together the lives of characters across generations and geographies. Against the backdrop of significant historical upheavals—the freedom movement in Bengal, the turmoil of the Second World War, and the

traumatic partition of India in 1947—the narrative unfolds across three distinct cities: Calcutta, Dhaka, and London. Through the lens of diverse perspectives, Ghosh invites readers to contemplate the intricacies of human relationships, cultural memory, and the quest for belonging amidst the backdrop of shifting political landscapes and diasporic experiences.

At the heart of *The Shadow Lines* lies a profound interrogation of national identity and the construction of borders—both physical and metaphorical. Ghosh challenges conventional notions of nationhood, probing the boundaries between individuals, communities, and nations. The characters' journeys—from 'Going Away' to 'Coming Home'—are marked by encounters with blurred lines, both literal and metaphorical, that transcend the confines of time and space. These 'Shadow Lines' serve as potent symbols of the fluidity and ambiguity inherent in human existence, echoing the complexities of identity in an ever-changing world.

In this paper, we embark on an exploration of Ghosh's thematic tapestry, delving into the nuances of transnational identity, borders, and diasporic experiences as portrayed in *The Shadow Lines*. Through a close reading of the text, supplemented by critical analysis and scholarly insights, we seek to unravel the layers of meaning embedded within Ghosh's narrative, shedding light on the enduring relevance of his work in contemporary discourse on literature, identity, and globalization.

Discussion and Analysis

Amitav Ghosh's Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel *The Shadow Lines*, published in 1988, is an overall form of subtle interweaving of the fact of history, fiction, and reminiscence of the post partition scenario of violence. The novel is analysed here as an object of art that defamiliarized "the habitual nature of everyday experience" which makes "perception stale and automatic" (Fowler 93). Here Ghosh defamiliarizes the general psychology or thinking about the national identity caused by the traumatic experience that is the traditional and habitual experiences of the character in the novel as well as the audience

or the reader. Generally, the historical nationalist issues such as partition, riots and violence cause the trauma, making political consciousness of national identity drawing the shadow lines in the mind of the people that lead them to create a unique diasporic persona to cope up with the new culture and social milieu of the land they migrate to. But rarely do they realize the original cause behind those historical issues. It's nothing but the extreme nationalism instilled in people by the politicalisation of the elements of social milieu such as culture, tradition, national and religious identity etc. But Ghosh draws the matter in an unfamiliar way as his characters undertake different journeys throughout the novels beyond any boundaries of national identity. In the words of Anshuman A. Mondel "In its form, however, the novel also enacts the transgression of these shadow lines, moving across space and time with an ease that challenges the categorical permanence that political borders aspire to represent." (9)

Amitav Ghosh has used many devices like memory, imagination and so on to structure and organize his novel. Travel motif is metaphorically used as a leitmotif in the novel to delineate the journey of the protagonist and other characters. The individual identity of the characters is weaved through the context of critical historical moments to nationality and beyond national identity. Sometimes they undertake their journey physically through the geographical lands and sometimes in imagination.

Human beings always try to quench the thirst of knowledge or have a desire to know the unknown, to discover the new. Undertaking a journey is a part of human being through which he can quench his inquisitive thirst. In this novel the narrator with his inquisitive adolescent mind idolizes Tridib, the Narrator's uncle, who gives him The Bartholomew's Atlas, a globe, when he was only nine years old. At the age of nine the anonymous boy gets involved in the imagination of globe. The author of the novel has used the anonymous boy as an alter ego of the protagonist Tridib and the boy has no name except he is called as Narrator. The narrator, the diasporic persona of Tridib, belongs to no particular nation and he has no

particular identity. And the narrator also undertakes his journey beyond the national identity in his imagination when Tridib tells him about his journey to London, his stories, and narrates the lands to the narrator with his tattered Atlas. Subsequently when he visits London physically, he visits down his memory lane and observes that places are exactly what he heard from Tridib. With the help of Tridib's Atlas, he learnt certain hard truths about people and places and finally recognizes what Umberto Eco mentioned to Alfred Korzybski in his *Foucault's Pendulum* as "a map is not the territory" (Ch. 83). He drew circles on the maps to find to his utter amazement that "Khulna is about as far from Srinagar as Tokyo is from Beijing, or Moscow from Venice, or Washington from Havana, or Cairo from Naples" (Ghosh 231). And he further discovered that "Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than they had drawn their lines - so closely that I, in Calcutta, had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka" (Ghosh 233). In this way the author of the novel prolongs the perception of national identity and the geographical discord. Later on, he claims that "Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with" (Ghosh 20). He told him that "'real desire' for knowing could carry one beyond the limits of one's time, place and self 'to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror'" (Ghosh 29). With such statements throughout the novel, Ghosh got success to make coalesce of time and space. As Mondel puts it "The Shadow Lines probably presents Ghosh's most direct confrontation with Nationalism and national identity. It is unsurprising therefore, that the motif of map appears throughout the text." (87). Journey of imagination beyond any national boundary or space and time is instilled in narrator's memory by his uncle's description of the tattered Atlas, a metaphor for space. The real desire to travel through the geographical lands in his imagination dissolves the place and time transforming into borderless image between the mirror and his self – there stands no border between his identity of self (image in the mirror) and the national identity (Calcutta or Dhaka). He also

observes the real life behaviour of his idol Tridib who, as grandmother called, is a wastrel. But he knows the truth of his “archetypal figure of inspiration in children’s fiction, who leads the child through a maze of insightful stories”. (Sen 133). “The story of his journey to England in installments” fascinates the narrator. He is also fascinated by Tridib’s “vast reservoir” of knowledge in “all kinds of subjects – Mesopotamian stellae, east European jazz, the habits of arboreal apes, the plays of Garcia Lora, there seemed to be no end to the things he could talk about”(Ghosh 8-9). Thus, the narrator has created his inquisitive self that led him to undertake journeys in imagination or in reality. Tridib’s visit to Gole Park all the way from Ballygunge carries a metaphorical resemblance and meaning. If Ballygunge be the microcosm of a nation then he visits another nation (i.e. Gole Park) to avoid his neighbour to become “neutral” and live “impersonal places – coffee houses, bars, street-corner addas – the sort of place people come, talk and go away without expecting to know each other any further”. (Ghosh 9) A desire to visit such utopian nation aroused in the mind of the narrator. He criticizes the identity of a nation in a cosmopolitan way when he experiences the new Gole Park: “Gole Park was considered to be more or less outside Calcutta” (Ghosh 8). He also experiences the geographical discord that creates a problem of his personal and national identity which makes a mess of the national identity which is the primary obstacle in building a nation and his healthy self.

Thus, the growing boy starts living in the shadow of the man he idolizes and the author of the novel draws an individual into history as well as social and political turbulence. In effect the novel begins with the memory of the narrator that the story begins in 1939. It was the time of political turbulence in British India resulted in cataclysm of partition and the subsequent violence. And following that the family of the narrator dispersed. Here the novel started revolving around the historical events like the freedom movement in Bengal, the Second World War, the partition of India in 1947, and riots and violence in Bangladesh and

India. Ghosh allegorically uses the upside-down story of the Dutta Chaudhari family in Dhaka before the partition to bring in light the truth after the violence and partition. These incidents in the novel teach us the very similar upside-down condition of a nation. Earnest Renan's opinions presented in his essay "What is a Nation?" become clear to us like daylight. Renan opines that the elements of building a nation are not the race, religions, language, culture etc. rather a nation is a "Soul and Body." A nation is built with the common emotions of the people of a land they inhabit. In *The Shadow Lines* the narrator himself growing a diasporic persona as a mouthpiece of the author as well as his uncle Tridib who already became a wastrel as his grandma called him. The narrator learns the names of the unknown places from his early childhood from Tridib. He tells him the story of Englishman Tresawsen who is said to have travelled to Malaysia, Fiji, Bolivia, the Guinea Coast and Ceylon before coming to India, and the story of Tristan, 'a man without a country who fell in love with a woman-across-the-sea....' (Ghosh 186). Meeting with a number of leading nationalists in Calcutta estranged him from him and his wife from most circles of British Society in the city. But Tresawsen's spirit was not oppressed or invaded. The same spirit was also found in Nick, May Price's brother, when he tells the narrator's father "he wanted to travel around the world like Lionel Tresawsen, to live in faraway places halfway around the globe, to walk through the streets of La Paz and Cairo"(Ghosh 52). Tridib also got that kind of spirit from those stories and so did the narrator. Likewise, Tridib and the Narrator try to make relationship beyond the seas and lands with May Price and Ila respectively that makes evident that the lines are just on a map. Tridib writes a letter to May suggesting their meeting "... as a stranger in a ruin.... far from their friends and relatives - in a place without a past, without history, free, really free, two people coming together, with the utter freedom of strangers" (Ghosh 144).

Here the narrator presents a vision of ‘a man without a country.’ Suvir Kaul claims in his essay “The Separation Anxiety” that “In fact, *The Shadow lines* describes no sexual or romantic relationship between two people who share an obvious identity of nationality, race, or cultural experience – desire originates, and finds its object, across borders” (Kaul271). Basically, it happens everywhere “wherever you wish it.” It’s about “an old story, the best story in Europe, ... told when Europe was a better place, a place without a borders and countries – it was a German story in what we call Germany, Nordic in the North, French in France, Welsh in Wales,...” (186). Thus, the narrator was influenced to transcend the boundaries or goes beyond a place and time. These stories lead the narrator’s imagination beyond his national identity. Earnest Renan opines that it’s the problem of building a nation that every nation starts thinking about its superiority and hence the subsequent violence and obstacles in building healthy internationalism. Meenakshi Mukherjee in her essay “Maps and Mirrors” writes “Identical realities across territorial borders which were originally meant to mark out differences, or across communities that are imagined to be different, reiterate the theme of the novel as spelt out in its title” (266). The narrator’s love for Ila, the post-colonial cosmopolitan, who travelled through the lands and lived alienated from her own Indian culture and tradition, suggests his desire for cosmopolitanism. Her cultural identity crisis as an adult and an individual is caused by her upbringing abroad as a daughter of a diplomat. She is the victim of cultural dislocation. The cosmopolitan concept instilled in her the search for superiority. One can notice that both the narrator and Ila and even Tridib travelled beyond their country and national identity in search of a prestigious self identity and neglecting the national identity which is the biggest obstacle to build a soulful nation. She fails to realize the roots and lacks sense of belonging to ‘home’. She is antithesis to the narrator and Tridib though. She doesn’t have the imaginative faculty like the narrator to observe a place or a nation. When the London undergrounds, the landscapes fascinate the narrator, they were just

places to Ila : ‘And I would say to her: You wouldn’t understand: to you Cairo was a place to pissin’ (Ghosh 21). Here the novelist draws the blurred lines within one’s own self-identity and goes beyond one’s national identity and culture. Being a cosmopolitan Ila questions the Indian culture that makes the essential boundaries of a nation. When Robi, her uncle, stops her from drinking and dancing with a businessman in the nightclub of Grand Hotel, Ila gets furious and says “What do you think you’re doing?” (Ghosh 157) Robi replies that girls in India are not allowed to behave like that way. “That is our culture that is how we live”. Ila breaks away and shouts “Do you see why I have chosen to live in London. Do you see it is only because I want to be free – free of your bloody culture and you”. This is not the end. The problem of individual identity and their inner and outward conflicts inflicted by geographical discord and dissimilar cultures make her cry saying “I wish it were that ... You see, you’ve never understood, ... I never did any of those things: I’m about as chaste, in my own way, as any woman you’ll ever meet” (SL 188). The same way the geographical discord lead Thamma to the feeling of being alienated when she visits her own birthplace Dhaka from where she was forced to migrate to India in 1947. She wonders if there is any real border or boundary between Dhaka and Calcutta separating the regions. But at her utter astonishment she finds that there is no such real physical boundary between nations. She says, “and if there is no difference, both sides would be the same, it will be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train to Dhaka and get off at Calcutta, the next day without anyone stopping us.” And her further question “What was it all for?” strikes hard the very notion of nationalism and its real identity. She makes us think what for was all those killings, partition and everything if there is nothing between the nations. It was all about the political gain rather than any physical boundary. According to Tagore “A country is not territorial, but ideational” (qtd. in Khilnani 198)

On the other hand the titles of the two parts of the novel viz. 'Going Away' and 'Coming Home' metaphorically explain the temporary and spatial journey of the characters. The second part of the novel titled 'Coming Home' is more than Thamma's wish to bring her old uncle back to "... where he belonged, to her invented country" (SL 137) i.e. India. The second part of the novel begins with the retirement of the narrator's grandmother from the school in 1962 when the narrator turned to ten. Her retirement from the school job caused her life monotonous. Accompanying the narrator, she used to visit the lakes near their new house and reminiscent her home and the happy family in Dhaka. She also remembers the upside-down condition of her family which is an allegory of the complete novel and its theme of partition, migration and displacement. The divisive line in between her family at her home in Dhaka constructed herself and the idea of nationalism. And now her journey to her own birthplace reconstructs her notion of a nation and national identity. The second part of the novel namely "Coming Home" is not only about Thamma's homecoming or bringing back her Jethamoshai to her own invented nation but about her recognition of the international home. It's like Thamma's bildungsroman, development of herself and journey beyond her pre-conceived national identity. Her often visit to the people who had migrated to Calcutta after the partition shows her search for something that haunts herself or individual identity and consciousness baptized in the crucible of national divides in 1947. Thus she met Minadi who informed her about one of the sons of Jethamosai living in Garia, Calcutta. And that information shook her memory and she becomes conscious about her blood-line forgetting all the upside-down condition of her family and dares to go beyond her national identity proclaiming "It doesn't matter whether we recognize each other or not. We are the same flesh, the same blood, the same bone, and now at last, after all these years, perhaps we will be able to make amends for all that bitterness and hatred."(SL 159) But her intention to bring back Jethamoshai to her own invented nation shatters her notion of the nation when he denies

going to India proclaiming “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.” (SL 215). His has an experience of partition, riots and violence that constructed his notion of the identity of a nation, the real face behind the construction of a national identity. He is also free from religious boundary, an essential element for the construction of a nation. He lives with a Muslim family and eats food cooked by Khalil’s wife. “Do you know? ... There was a time when that old man was so orthodox that he wouldn’t let a Muslim’s shadow pass within ten feet of his food?” (SL 210). Grandmother said, “In those days many people followed rules like that: they had an instinct” (SL 210). But irony of time dissolved and melted those religious and cultural elements that construct the spatial boundary. And finally the physical boundary in-between the family remains no more. They become part of a space and geographical boundary less glove. Now they are the global being mitigating their instinct and familial problem. The narrator ‘goes away’ with the help of Tridib and ‘comes home’ with the help of May and in his own flight of imagination the narrator gets success in experiencing the social milieu that creates a social consciousness about the world around them. And their identity beyond a nation is reconstructed by the anonymous narrator’s own flight of imagination when we understand his journey to past down his memory lane. The narrator’s individual identity is constructed through his own narrative.

One of the central figures of Indian English Literature, Amitav Ghosh is profoundly known for his realistic approach towards contemporary problems. He is an admirer of Rabindranath Tagore and his influence can be felt in Ghosh’s writings. Specifically in *Shadow Lines* this influence can be seen while dealing with the theme of nationalism. Anshuman M. Mondel says in his work *Amitav Ghosh; Contemporary World Writers that*

Tagore "... was not an anti-modern traditionalist, who dismissed modernity out of hand, and indeed he found much of it worthy of respect and admiration. But his concern about it can best be gauge by his antipathy to nationalism, and it's in this respect that Tagore's impact on Ghosh's work can be most profoundly felt." (35)

Throughout the novel the basic theme of the novel is the search for identity in the backdrop of freedom and their roots i.e. their national identity or a home which is an uncertain place or border. They fail to decide whether Calcutta, Dhaka or London is their original home. Their enigmatic soul is uncertain about their journey to home i.e. Calcutta or from home; they are going to Dhaka as its birthplace or from Dhaka for an invented home or sometimes to coming from London or back to London – all are perplexing. They are uncertain about their belonging to a particular home. Thamma don't find a proper language to express their journey to home and fulfill her quest. Thus, the concept of the whole novel is the subtle interweaving of their coming and going and belonging to none; is expressed well in the utterance mentioned below:

"You see, in our family we don't know whether we're coming or going it's all my grandmother's fault but of course, the fault wasn't hers at all: it lay in language. Every language assumes a centrality, a fixed and settle point to go away from and come back to what my grandmother was looking for, was a word for a journey which was not a coming or a going at all, a journey that was a search for precisely that fixed point which permits the proper use of verbs of movement." (Ghosh 153)

Primarily Thamma represents the conviction of the elements such as culture, religion etc. that construct the national identity which is just the opposite of cosmopolitan Ila's approach to nation and culture. But finally she realizes the truth behind the border construction between nations. And thus all the characters in the novel undertake a journey beyond their national identity and self towards the development of a universal belonging of

the humankind, the truth of human existence. Thus Ghosh shows their journey towards truth beyond a nation and border. As Ernest Gellner says “nationalism is not awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist” (Thought and Change 169).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of identity, nationalism, culture, migration, border, partition, and diaspora in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* offers profound insights into the complexities of human experience in the modern world. Through the intricately woven tapestry of characters and narratives, Ghosh navigates the fluid boundaries of nationhood and the porous nature of borders, challenging conventional notions of identity and belonging.

The novel serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring impact of historical events such as partition and migration on individual lives and collective memory. Ghosh deftly captures the nuances of diasporic experiences, portraying the resilience and adaptability of individuals as they navigate the complexities of cultural displacement and geographical dislocation.

At the heart of *The Shadow Lines* lies a profound meditation on the fluidity of identity and the interconnectedness of human experience across time and space. Through the characters’ journeys—from the streets of Calcutta to the alleyways of Dhaka and the neighbourhoods of London—Ghosh illuminates the ways in which borders, both physical and metaphorical, shape individual lives and collective destinies.

Ultimately, Ghosh’s novel invites readers to reflect on the enduring relevance of themes such as identity, nationalism, and diaspora in an increasingly globalized world. As we grapple with the complexities of cultural diversity and geopolitical tensions, *The Shadow Lines* serves as a powerful reminder of the shared humanity that transcends borders and unites us all in our quest for belonging.

In this light, the novel stands as a testament to the power of literature to provoke thought, inspire empathy, and foster understanding across cultural and geographical divides. As we continue to navigate the complexities of our ever-changing world, Ghosh's work serves as a timeless reminder of the enduring importance of embracing diversity, cherishing our shared heritage, and forging connections that transcend the borders of nation and culture.

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