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## REMAPPING AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES*: A MIRAGE OF PARTITION

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### ABSTRACT

The tragedy of Partition encounter has given rise to fictional exploration with an aim to define inner turmoil and social complexity that plagued the subcontinent. Literary texts on the subject of Partition, therefore, are read emphatically and treated as surrogate document. *The Shadow Lines* falls under the category of Partition novels which recount the partition of British India into India and Pakistan in 1947. However, the narrative of the novel does not follow that usual storyline of Partition novels predicated on the events and incidents of communal frenzy that engulfed the region during the Partition. Amitav Ghosh captures the enormity and complexity of Partition by unobtrusively insinuating that it failed to resolve the tangle of communal politics in the subcontinent. In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh foregrounds minor riots of 1964 in contradistinction to 1947 riots to implicitly suggest the contemporaneous significance of Partition. The minor riots allegorize the interconnectedness of communities and continuity of social relations on both sides of the boundary which the narrator-hero terms as "our looking-glass border" (Ghosh 163). The pangs of Partition holocaust had mitigating effect on the bruised psyche of the innumerable victims who would listen to the dozens of Tridib like stories in circulation during the riots.

The substance of this paper is set against these minor riots of 1964 which are centrestaged to show that the Partition has not solved the communal problem and thus reject the very concept of Partition which is nothing else but a mirage.

**Key Words:** Partition, Mirage, Communal frenzy, Social complexity, Psyche, Borderline.

The freedom of India was coterminous with the Partition, a major cataclysmic event of the subcontinent resulting in the unpalatable partition of the families and cohesive interdependent communities, the spate of people leaving their ancestral homes, fields and fortunes to be labeled as refugees, the disruption of cultural continuities and the massacre of millions of people apart from heart-rending atrocities on women and children. Describing the monstrosity of the situation Urvashi Butalia in her

book *The Other Side of Silence* records that Partition left one million dead, twelve million homeless and about 75,000 women were abducted and raped by men of religion different from their own in the aftermath of Britain's clumsy partition of India and Pakistan in 1947.

The term Partition has often been described as holocaust because it somewhat insinuates the gravity of violence perpetrated in the name of 'religion'. The appropriation of religion for purposes

other than faith and way of life can be a “source of terrifying violence” (Rao 77). The communal politics played by the Congress Party and the Muslim League resulted in the Partition. However, “Communal politics, which was meant to be buried by the partition, has assumed even more menacing proportions in all three countries [India, Pakistan and Bangladesh]” (Puniyani 87). In *Borders and Boundaries*, Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin remark, “The abundance of political histories on Partition is almost equaled by the paucity of social histories of it” (Menon & Bhasin 6). Literature, they add, has “stepped in, at least partly, to record the full horror of Partition.... In one sense, it can be considered a kind of social history not only because it so approximates reality but because it is the only significant non-official contemporary record we have of the time, apart from reportage” (Menon & Bhasin 6-7). The human experience of Partition “went unrecorded, unverballed; historical fiction, thus, ‘validates historical truth precisely in its power to represent’” (Menon & Bhasin 7), turmoil themselves, reflect upon the physical tortures and psychological outbursts of victims. In the prominent Partition novels viz. Khuswant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* (1956), Attia Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), Manohar Malgonkar’s *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964), Raj Gill’s *The Rape* and Chaman Nahal’s *Azadi* (1975), the major characters undergo the turmoil of communal frenzy whereas *The Shadow Lines*, by foregrounding the debilitating monolithic prescriptions of an insular nationalist ethos, challenges the validity of borderlines which actually for him are just shadow lines.

Amitav Ghosh is very famous as a great modern novelist of India. Not very long ago, the novelist expressed himself in a language to which he was alien but not quite, a language he had mastered grammatically and correctly as a second language. Uneasy and yet appropriately, he took for his theme and background the Raj, colonial India and post-Independent India. He wrote about his country, either in an idealized manner, or in one which would appeal to a foreign reader. He simplified the complexities of Indian life and culture; his language was English but in thought and sensibility he hovered between two worlds. The trio of the twentieth

century—R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand—laid the fountain of Indian literature in English, but the ‘Indianness’ of their images can certainly be questioned.

His novels show his historical as well as political consciousness. He also depicted the wave of violence after the partition of Bangladesh. Using the narrative technique of unfurling events, by reading old newspaper reports, Amitav Ghosh shows how communal violence spread in Calcutta and cities of erstwhile East Pakistan in 1964. As he stresses, rumour took over. The poisoning of water, the trains of dead bodies, all incredible rumours, further vitiated the communal frenzy and increased the violence. Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* is very contemporary and relevant as it shows how communal fanatics thrived on the spread of rumours which intensified feelings of anger and triggered off violence. The bland newspaper reports and memory technique of Amitav Ghosh removes the impact of time. It is implied that the riots are contemporaneous. The 1964 Calcutta riots could be the 1984 Delhi riots, the 1987 Meerut riots or in recent times the 1989 Bhagalpur killings. They all follow a similar pattern, suspicion, distrust and rumour activating conditioned minds, all sources of terrifying communal violence. Ghosh was highly perturbed at the massacre of thousands of Sikhs after the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. In his essay *The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi*, he makes a confession that within few months of the catastrophe he started working on *The Shadow Lines* and he was taken backward in time to earlier memories of riots which he witnessed in childhood. And the novel ultimately became “a book not about any one event but about the meaning of such events and their effects on the individuals who live through them” (60). The novel assumes importance in the wake of frequent recurrence of communal frenzy and acerbity manifested in the Delhi massacre of Sikhs in 1984, the destruction of Babri Masjid, the Bombay bomb blasts, the Godara carnage, etc. The nationalist struggle against the colonial rule won freedom for the country, albeit at the heavy cost of Partition leading to concomitant communal riots of the worst kind in the history of the subcontinent. All his novels are well known for the creation of great characters. The great

writer is also known for including the element of realism in the pages of his novels. In the same way, his novels clearly show the element of pathos in a highly pathetic manner.

*The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh is a popular and perfect masterpiece in the sphere of fiction. This novel is a remarkable novel by any standards as it transcends the narrow categorization of an Indian novel. *The Shadow Lines*, which was published in 1988, helped him to receive the famous Sahitya Akademi Award in 1989. The present novel shows reality as he had seen with his eyes or through his imagination. He has depicted different events in a clear manner. The story is based on the partition of Bengal and consequent communal riots. Its main reason is that the story of the novel is based on the Hindu-Muslim riots which had taken place between the people of India and Pakistan. The characters in the novel show their sufferings as a result of those riots. The writer has depicted the pathetic and tragic experiences of different characters which they had made in Dhaka, Calcutta and other places. The partition of Bengal shows the importance of nationalism in two separate parts of India and East Pakistan. Very perceptively, Amitav Ghosh shows how different cultures and communities are becoming antagonistic to a point of no return. As we study *The Shadow Lines* of Amitav Ghosh, we find him the master craftsman in the art of characterisation. The writer has shown himself as a great artist to express the tragic and the pathetic deaths of three persons in a highly effective manner with matchless perfection. The novel shows the elements of beauty, intelligence and worldly wisdom in a clear manner but he showed the element of pathos in a highly touching and effective manner. There are many incidents and events in the story of the novel which are highly sad and serious. The writer has described all the minute details of that tragic incident in the most pathetic manner.

The title of *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh itself, on the surface, can be divided into two parts—Shadow and Lines. The 'Lines' is quite symbolical because it indicates the various divisions on the basis of caste, religion and nations. But the word 'Shadow' means that all such divisions are simply man-made and have no permanent worth. In

fact, they are immaterial and cannot wholly divide the human beings but when someone realizes their existence, they result in great destruction and riots, although they are quite imaginary and have no practical existence. The title 'The Shadow Lines' is really symbolic because the partition of India was shocking to many for their changed nationality. Tha'mma's character shows the support of the idea of nationality and her own culture. The parallel cultures of India and the west are represented through the characters of Tha'mma and Ila. According to the writer, these two cultures were related to two migrated female characters like Tha'mma the old and traditional grandmother of the narrator and Ila, the young and modern lady with her deep faith in freedom and modernity. The title of the novel is symbolic of barriers and partitions too. Individuals stand divided, as do families, nations and countries. Tridib who had tried to teach the narrator 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 Joycean epiphany experienced by the narrator towards the end of the novel. It is a novel with a message and a philosophy—this is unfolded in an intricately and colourfully woven piece of tapestry by a sensitive and skilful artisan.

The whole story of the novel is based on the activities and mutual relations of the two families. Although their races, nations and religions are quite different still they are very close. Lionel Tresawsen and Justice Chandrashekhar Chaudhary are friends. Mr. Lionel has been wandering in many countries and when he nears the old age, he becomes religious and we find in him leanings towards spiritualism. Once he meets Justice Chandrashekha where they become friends. This friendship is long living, passing from one generation to the other and, thus, we notice the futility of man-made divisions between the nations and religions. Lionel goes back to his country England. There his daughter has married one Mr. S. N. I. Price and they are blessed with a son whom they name Nick Price and a daughter named May Price. But the relations between the two families continue and,

thus, the imaginary shadow lines have completely disappeared. Similarly there a family living in Dhaka and there was no trouble before division of India. Mayadebi and Tha'mma are the two daughters of the younger brother of Justice Chandrashekha. The first is married to a diplomat serving in Government of India and the other to an engineer. Tha'mma eventually becomes widow and works as a school teacher in a school at Calcutta. She has become the principal there and then retires. In the family of Chaudhary, there was only one son, Sahib. Jatin, Tridib and Robi were the three sons of Mayadebi. We notice, thus, that the families also are divided between themselves but their affinities and attachments are not completely lost and the imaginary shadow lines of division cannot separate them permanently. The internal sentiments, feelings and emotions among different people belonging to any country or race are basically almost the same. The cultural unity and humanitarian feelings cannot be divided by such shadow lines. The writer shows that imaginary border lines or (shadow lines) cannot destroy the identity of people of both sides of the boundary. The story revolves around Tridib, the narrator's uncle. No less vivid and memorable are the portraits of the narrator's grandmother, his cousin Ila and the English girl May Price. The novel creates a wonderful scene of relationships—uncles and aunts are interspersed easily and without any confusion in the course of the narrative, as are also different locations—Calcutta, Dacca, London. We learn that Tridib was born in 1932, had been to England with his parents in 1939, where his father, an important diplomat in the Foreign Service, had received medical treatment. May Price (with whose family they shared a close relationship) had begun a long correspondence with Tridib in 1959. Tridib died in a riot in 1964, while May was on a visit to India. It is not, however, such events that make up the vital texture of the novel, we are made aware of them only incidentally. What holds our attention is the delicate thread out of which the narrator creates a larger-than-life portrait of Tridib who used his imagination not to fantasize but to expand his sense of meaning and erase the narrow barriers of lines and Partitions. The narrator fondly reminisces: "Tridib who had

given me worlds to travel in and eyes to see them with" (Ghosh16).

In the novel, the narrator-hero came into contact with other characters like Tridib, Ila, May Price and the grandmother after becoming an adult. He had learnt from Tridib to make use of his imagination as well as the idea of nationality. By the power of his imagination, he had travelled many lands with 'The Shadow Lines' of their boundaries. The riots at Dhaka show that it was a fight for their separate political boundaries or for their own nationality. The narrative transcends the nationalist projections of selfhood and otherness and ushers into transnational spaces of global culture.

This probing deep into the consciousness of his characters and at the same time studying them as members of a social community, certainly, does not come to him as a surprise. *The Shadow Lines* takes the reader into the consciousness of several characters, particularly the narrator's grandmother, Ila's parents and May Price. The novel ends with the mystery of Tridib's voluntary death—a death symbolic of his sacrifice for humanity. The writer has also indicated the emotional relationship between Tridib and May Price which was cut short in the middle. May also admitted that Tridib had made the sacrifice of his life to rescue her from the fatal attack of the mad rioters. It is highly thrilling to imagine that an Indian boy had fallen in love with an English young lady living far away in England. They had met twice but the end was highly pathetic as expressed by the writer in his unique style. So, each consciousness emerges in the light and shade, etched with its own individual quirks and idiosyncrasies; each character is caught between shadow lines in the wasteland of prejudice, dogma and a narrow nationalism.

Time past merges fluidly with time present. At the very start of the novel, we have the narrator, a young boy, gazing with respect and admiration as Tridib 'makes-up' a story for his group of friends at his adda at Gole Park—with a view to impress them about his English connections. This is followed by a long digression about the narrator's own visit to England and his meetings with May Price after Tridib's death. The pendulum swings to the present again at this stage: we are back to the narrator's

childhood with his cousin Ila and her mother, nicknamed Queen Victoria. Within the first two pages, there are several time-switches; the movement seems natural and easy, making no special demands on the reader. This deft handling of time in which the 'expanded' moment embraces within it, present and past time, gives the novel a Proustian richness and complexity. It is clear that with Ghosh the Indian novel in English has surpassed the rigid barriers of time, place and action, thus making earlier Indian fiction seem dated and simplistic.

The literary and cultural atmosphere of Calcutta's teashops is quite naturally evoked, and is as easily recognizable as the cigarette which smoulders near Tridib's ashtray when he is engrossed in intellectual activity of a higher kind. The riot and the subsequent events that lead to his death filter through to the reader as the narrator records his research experience while he is sitting one afternoon in 1979 in the Teen Murti House Library, New Delhi. The riots have always remained a mystery to him as he records: "Every word I write about those events of 1964 is the product of a struggle with silence. It is a struggle I am destined to lose" (Ghosh159). Among the records of January 1964, he reads about the disappearance of the "sacred relic known as the Mui-i-Mubarak" (Ghosh163) —a hair of the prophet Mohammed, from the Hazratbal Mosque. The cause of the riots, not clear to him earlier, now impinges on his consciousness and he realizes that communal riots which had been sparked off in Kashmir had spread to Pakistan, Bangla Desh and Calcutta. He looks at the atlas which once belonged to Tridib, Tridib whose imagination surmounted all barriers and borders. He ruminates:

They had drawn their borders, believing in that pattern, in the enhancement of 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 prehistoric Gondwanaland. What had they felt, I wondered, when they discovered that they had created not a separation, but a yet-undiscovered irony—the irony that killed Tridib. (Ghosh 170)

As the narrator reads on, he passes on from uncertainty to certainty; he is born anew as it were.

The story shows the days of the partition of India when the families, living in one country for generations are obliged to be uprooted and leave their generation old affiliations but they still cherish memories and wish to go back. So, we notice that though they have been divided geographically, emotionally they are still living there. Tha'mma, the grandmother of the narrator, always feels her attachment with her old home in Dhaka and the uncle, a very old man of ninety, is still living there. He is not ready to leave his home and come to India. He has strong faith in his society where he has lived all his life with the Muslims and the people of other religions. They are united by the similar language and almost the same cultural activities and the present division of the land into two countries has no meaning for them. Tha'mma is living in Calcutta, now a part of India, but she sincerely wishes to visit her old house in Dhaka at least once which has now become difficult because of 'The Shadow Lines' of division. Anyhow, she manages to go there with Tridib. She sees the old uncle, living in the company of Khalil who is a rickshaw puller. In his past life, this uncle hated the Muslims and avoided even their shadow but now he is living with the Muslim family. This also shows that division on religions and caste basis is just a show and immaterial.

The division created by forming India and East Pakistan has proved futile and their cultural unity is not affected in the least. The people of various religions still mix and are united in the form of the same society and reveal this cultural unity time and again. This has been shown through the installation of Mu-i-Mubarak when the people of all castes and religions, Hindu, Muslim, Sikhs, and Buddhists gather in thousands to see the sacred relic and when it disappears, all of them demonstrate together in very large number. This collective activity is a proof of cultural unity and refuses to accept 'The Shadow Lines' of division which we see disappearing from time to time and thus the basic human emotion and the sense of universal brotherhood, at last, proves more powerful than any other thing.

Actually, the novelist shows that such lines between religions and nations are quite unnatural and no more than mere shadows. This is why; they disappear from time to time. These lines are



generally not accepted and the people of both the sides suffer from homesickness and this demarcation, thus, becomes quite meaningless. We are faced with the question—‘Why all this killing?’ It is the result of such shadow line, that riots take place, the school bus of the children is stoned, and a number of innocent young and old men are killed in this foolish frenzy of narrow nationalism which is the result of such imaginary shadow lines. Robi is quite correct when he points out: “What would it change?...Peace will not prevail even after hundreds of lines are drawn”(Ghosh 179). This is the chief message of this novel and the futility of man-made division which are not only harmful but illusionary as well. The novelist has succeeded to prove that the cultural and emotional unity is the basic fact of human life and everything else is simply a shadow.

Nationalism, in the modern times, is the cause of violence. The writer has tried to show that religion, caste, and language are the causes of developing the feelings of nationalism in the mind of people. They may take up to violence in the name of patriotism for their own country. Later, such narrow feelings become a hurdle in the progress of civilization and culture. Such feelings also disturb the unity of a country. On the other hand, they increase not only violence but bitter hatred among the people of two countries because they talk only for their own country. The division of India led to the riots in Dhaka and Calcutta. In the novel, the writer depicted the communal riots between Hindus and Muslims in 1964 when Bengal was divided. The novel is very popular for the Indian readers because the writer has made an authentic description of the communal riots which had spread in that area due to the division of Bengal. Both Hindus and Muslims madly fought against one another like bitter enemies. As a result of this, the mob of the rioters burnt houses, looted shops and killed a large number of innocent people. In this way, the description by the writer shows a deeply touching story of that period. He depicted things as had taken place in reality. The people of the two sides were fighting in the name of their nationalism. The people who were fighting in the name of nationalism were doing so under imaginary border lines of their respective countries. Amitav Ghosh has given real look with flesh and blood to his characters to impress

his readers in a popular manner. Both the sisters, Tha'mma and Mayadebi and their family members faced and suffered the fatal consequences of such violence in the shape of the murder of their old uncle, Tridib and Khalil, the poor rickshaw puller. May Price failed to achieve the fulfillment of her passion of love because Tridib had been killed in the prime of his youth by the rioters. The triple murder of Tridib, the old man Ukil-babu and Khalil, the rickshaw puller by the mad rioters who had been acting under the feelings of nationalism and communalism against Hinduism of India indicates that violence dominates the novel from the beginning the story up to its end. Tridib's death remained the tragic end of that violence.

The partition of India led to widespread plunder, arson and rape in the shape of communal riots both in India and East Pakistan. While Partition was devastating for all, for women it was a shocking realization of the religious, social and state control that could be imposed upon them over their lives, without limits. As Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin have shown in *Borders and Boundaries*, their pioneering work on the experiences of Indian women during Partition, “Family, community and state emerge as the three mediating and interlocking forces determining women's individual and collective destinies [Partition] once again recast them as keepers of national honor and markers of boundaries: between communities, and between communities and countries” (Menon & Bhasin 255). For example, the family of Dutta Choudhary and Tha'mma who used to live in Dhaka (East Bengal now Bangladesh) came to India but their hearts stayed in their old house in Dhaka. Though Calcutta remained peaceful for a few days, yet riots started there also after some time. There Muslims were the target of the mob of the rioters who burnt their houses and looted their property after killing many of them.

To sum up, the monster of communalism was neither contained at the time of freedom of India in 1947 nor in the postcolonial era. In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh has laid stress on the element of nationalism separately both for the people of India and for the people of East-Pakistan. The writer tried to find out the real meaning of that violence which had taken place in Dhaka in 1964 by means of

memories of migration. The partition of Bengal into two parts was a great shock to the people of both East and West Bengal for a long time. The people could not believe in the imaginary dividing 'Shadow Lines'. Robi strikes a note of despair by his comments that the Partition of India has not solved the problem: "And then I think to myself why don't they draw thousands of lines through the whole subcontinent and give every little place a new name?" (Ghosh179). If the whole effort of the Partition of the country was to gain freedom then that effort has gone futile. For Robi freedom is still "a mirage; the whole thing is a mirage" (Ghosh 179). In *Imam and the Indian: Prose Pieces*, the writer comments on such weak relationship between India and Bangladesh in these significant words, "The links are not those of language, religion, politics or economics. In a sense, the links are those of culture....the links are lived within the imagination. It is, therefore, an epic relationship: an epic without a text..." (122). So, it is true that *The Shadow Lines* is certainly a very popular and perfect composition in the field of fiction.

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#### Brief Bio-Note

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