

Amitav Ghosh's "The Shadow Lines": Problematics of National Identity

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Abstract : *Freedom from political colonialism came as a refreshing wind to the Indian writers who were now enthused to write with new outlook and express their indigenous ethos and beliefs. Post-colonial Indian English writers like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth , Amitav Ghosh etc, writing with great dynamism, distinctive voice, vigor and a level of self-reliance, have liberated Indian English literature from the colonial yoke. Historical nationalist issues such as diaspora, migration, refugees, colonial hegemony; socio-economic and cultural issues like east-west encounter, caste and class etc. become the concerns of these writers.*

The present paper is intended to examine Amitav Ghosh' treatment of the problematic of identity in "The Shadow Lines" (1988), which as a memory novel, sketches few historical events like the freedom movement in Bengal, the Second World War and the Partition of India in 1947 and the communal riots in Bangladesh and India. In this novel, Ghosh problematizes nationalism in his search for identity. The fervent nationalism upheld by grandmother is put to question and re-analysis. Ghosh explores the unreality and invalidity of traditional identity constructions such as nation and nationalism.

Keywords - *Identity, nationality, 'The Shadow Lines', trans-nationality.*

I. Introduction:

Freedom from political colonialism came as a refreshing wind to the Indian writers who were now enthused to write with new outlook and express their indigenous ethos and beliefs. Post-colonial Indian English writers like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth , Amitav Ghosh etc, writing with great dynamism, distinctive voice, vigor and a level of self-reliance, have liberated Indian English literature from the colonial yoke. Historical nationalist issues such as diaspora, migration, refugees, colonial hegemony; socio-economic and cultural issues like east-west encounter, caste and class etc. become the concerns of these writers.

The present paper is intended to examine Amitav Ghosh's treatment of the problematic of identity in "The Shadow Lines" (1988), which as a memory novel [1], sketches few historical events like the freedom movement in Bengal, the Second World War and the Partition of India in 1947 and the communal riots in Bangladesh and India.

II. Thematic Concern:

A highly innovative, complex and celebrated novel of Amitav Ghosh , ' The Shadow Lines'' Presents the trauma of partition/partition riots. "Ghosh has edged up his novel to confront the memory of traumatic events." [2] What implies the partition is not linear as Ghosh's novel which is written in the non- linear mode – an aspect which implies its title also – the shadowiness of the border line. But this border line – as an abstract construction – contributes only to problematise the situations and relations of a large number of people across it. Keeping this aspect in mind, this paper is prepared as a critique of Ghosh's treatment of the problematic of national identity.

The novel depicts a wide, cosmopolitan scenario- most of the major events take place either in London or Dhaka and the protagonist, at present, lives with his family in Calcutta. "The novel superbly demonstrates the arrival of modernism in India." [3]

Partition of people and that way, the issue of national identity need to be viewed from two angles – political and social – cultural or psychological. Issues like identity within a constructed national identity and feeling of oneness/ nationality ' / nationhood crossing one's political territory are central to the discussion of the problematic of national identity in "The Shadow Lines'. To conceptualize these aspects, it seems necessary that we clarify the idea of identity and 'in – between' space in Ghosh.

Standing as a unique creative writer in English following Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh deals with effects of colonialism. His writings while resisting generic divisions problematise the dominant discourse of history. One of the persistent idea in Ghosh's writing is the 'in – between' Space. It is evident that Ghosh contests the constructedness of various borders separating one nation / race / culture from the others. In his quest for identity, Ghosh (i) revises his approach to history; (ii) destabilizes the borders and (iii) Scrutinizes the suppressed voices.

III. Problematics of Individual Identity:

Identity is a very debatable proposition/ question, both theoretically and practically. The theoretical debate about identity concerns its nature, process of formation and its existential questions. Whereas essentialists believe in singularity of individual's identity, the post – modernists deny any such identity. Identity construction has been thus debated time and again, but one must acknowledge that an individual's identity is to a large extent formed by his / her social location which include his/her race, class, gender, etc. These problematics of individual identity have been applied / noticed in the national context in Ghosh's novel "The Shadow Lines" – the title itself suggesting the unreality and invalidity of constructions such as nation and nationality. The Shadowiness of the border line puts a question mark to the geographic boundary line between countries / nations and thus its identity. Ghosh considers space / place as non neutral, non objective. To him 'a place does not merely exist It has to be invented in one's imaginations' [4]. Ghosh presents it through Tridib's concept of space which was vast and comprehensive. Tridib's mind strove to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror. (32)

IV. Problematics of National Identity:

"Ghosh problematizes nationalism in his search for identity". [5] 'The Shadow Lines' interrogates national division backed by political consciousness and underlines the idea of emergence of a new world situation being hatched by the capitalist world economy. With the trans-nationalization of the forces of production and spread of market, the familiar national boundaries are pushed back to the darkness or the shadow.

In this novel 'a world beyond nation' has been posited as an ideal form of existence. This is most desirable in view of the growth of international capitalism and global market which demand freedom from the obstruction of national boundaries. 'The Shadow Lines' interrogates the process through which a sense of national identity is constructed. The construction of national identity is said to be the result of a dual dynamics-one homogenizing and the other differentiating. Construction of the idea of a nation or community as homogenous, i.e. unified & single, also suggests its difference from other nations or communities. Thus being Indian means being members of a single unified family sharing common goals and aspirations. This very concept of Indian will differentiate him / her from a Pakistani, an American or a British. Ghosh, striking at this very core of the dynamics of nationhood, shows that the idea of a nation is a misleading construction.

One fundamental question the novel raises is –"Is the nation a homogeneous entity?" which is univocally answered with a firm and emphatic 'No'. The incidents that inspired Ghosh to write the novel - inhuman massacre of the Sikhs following assassination of Indira Gandhi by the non-Sikh countrymen which deeply pained Ghosh [6] – is a proof that the claim of a homogenized nation is baseless. Though the riots erupting in the aftermath of Indira's assassination are not mentioned in the novel, there are a number of incidents to prove that the nation of India as a homogenous community was shattered for Ghosh. Communal riots consequent to defilement of Hazratbal Shrine in 1964 is a fitting example. The narrator of 'The Shadow Lines' as a school boy remembers how ill-feelings & suspicions poisoned the harmonious life of the Hindus & the Muslims. Rumours were that one community had poisoned the water supply to exterminate the other community. The whole atmosphere was filled with suspicions, fear and hatred. Now the narrator's best friend (Montu- Mansur) transformed into a feared enemy. Such internal divides interrogates the homogenous body polity of the nation, Ghosh focuses another very important point relevant to this – that is – the history of the nation shallows up the story of the individual: In the riots of 1964, the narrator's uncle Tridib had lost his life as a helpless victim to the maddening frenzy of communal hatred. This was a key moment in the story of the narrator's life. But, when after fifteen years later in 1979, the narrator attempts to recover the traces of this event in the archives of the Nehru Memorial Library, New Delhi, he does not find any mention of Tridib's death in the news papers. It seemed as if private story was not at all important for the nation's memory.

Through the narrator's growth from childhood to adulthood, Ghosh has shown that the idea of a national border is just a mirage. The deceptive nature of the national borders that are constructed to project an image of difference across political division is revealed in the novel. The narrator's grandmother firmly believes in the ability of national borders to differentiate her own community from other communities. Her nationalistic beliefs seem to be undermined as the novel unfolds. In 1964 when she plans to visit Dhaka, she wonders whether she would be able to see the borders between India and East Pakistan from the air. When her grandson (the narrator) mocks her asking - if the border line was a long black line, she says, "of course not. But surely there's something – trenches perhaps, or soldiers or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strip of land. Don't they call it no-man's land?"(167) with her experience of the traumatic events of the partition, grandmother's expectation of a border line is natural to her though absurd to others/us. With the unfolding of the novel, the grandmother is forced to realize the fact that the two sides of the border were merely the mirror image of each other. This realization in a sense pains her and forces her to interrogate the very purpose of the nationalist movement and the reasons of war between the nations. She tries to assert the necessity of a real demarcation. As borders to Thamma are absolute physical & tangible realistic, she says,

“But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference then? And if there's 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 isn't something in between? (167)

V. Shadowiness of Identity Construction:

The novelist brings out the arbitrary nature of the partition logic – that is, partition of India & Pakistan (Bangladesh) is illogical and arbitrary. The border lines are none but the arbitrary product of the politicians' whims. These arbitrary lines cannot really determine the cultural difference between the two communities living across the border. One way or the other India/Calcutta will remain connected to East Pakistan/Dhaka. The fact that Jethamosai, Tha'mma's uncle, refuses to leave Dhaka and migrate to India endorses this sort of thinking. To quote Jethamosai, “I don't believe in this India – Shindia. It's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose when you set there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will ever have you anywhere.” (237)

The Shadowiness of the border line, and that way, the implication of the title of the novel, thus clearly stands stated. Political division is arbitrary as it is arbitrarily taken and as such identity of the people across the so – called national border lines are imbalanced all the time. Notably this temporality of individual identity also suggests the temporality of the nation/national identity. The situation is succinctly brought out by Sadat Hassan Manto in the short story ‘Toba Tek Singh’, where the so –called lunatic only presents sanity. To say, political division of nation(s) is nothing but a farcical act. “The partition of the country is..... projected in the novel as an act of meaningless violence” [7] In the novel there is a growing sense that the logic of the nation state is necessarily at odds with various forms of sub continental community – that to be Indian is to be perversely and perhaps unsuccessfully defined oneself against one's mirror image from across the border.

Ghosh has shown in the novel that riots and distances at the social and national level do not really beget any solution through partition of the bigger nation – state. He has shown that violence does not get driven to the borders. Dhaka and Calcutta - the two different cities in two independent states - do not drift apart and become the other reality as they flare up at the slightest pretext. The pattern of violence in these cities relates them to each other. The narrator undertakes a voyage into this land which exists outside space, an expense without distances and a land of looking glass events. He is simply amazed to discover that the border could not separate these places, rather locked them into irreversible symmetry. He witnessed identical scenes of violence on both sides, with few human incidents of saving lives - indicative of indivisible sanity that binds people to each other independent of their governments. The border line becomes just “a looking glass border”. (247) Ghosh acknowledges no separate national or cultural realities because for him all such demarcations are shadow lines, arbitrary and invented divisions. “The author boldly tackles political themes both national and international.” [8]

VI. Conclusion:

Ghosh in this way problematises the idea of national identity. Interrogating Grandmother's fervent nationalism, Ghosh explores the unreality and invalidity of traditional identity constructions such as nation, nationality and nationalism. This he has brought to the forefront through three aspects : (1). Political borders are questioned and shown to be arbitrary – as they are whimsically taken by politicians, (2.) The idea of nationality – nation as a homogenous whole – has been contrasted – with inhumane activities poisoning the fraternal relationship among different races of the country and (3). The looking glass border has been set up – showing identical scenes of violence across border on the one hand and feeling of oneness with people of other countries on the other. Ghosh in “The Shadow Lines” attempts to create the image of the global umbrella which includes and encompasses various cultures and create a single unified global picture.

REFERENCES

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- [5] Sukanta Das, *Beyond the frontiers: Quest for identity in Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines*, in *The Atlantic Critical Review Quarterly*. Vol-8 No-1, Jan – March, 2009, 87.
- [6] Amitav Ghosh, “The Ghost of Mrs. Gandhi” in *New Yorker*, 17 July 1995. (Ghosh states that he got inspiration to write “The Shadow Lines” from the anti Sikh riots of 1984 in Delhi. “It became a book not about anyone event but about the meaning of such events through them”, he writes).
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