

AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES*: AN ATTEMPT AT INTERROGATING/NEGOTIATING NATION

Dr Deepak Upadhyay

Associate Professor, Dept. of English

Agra College, Agra

ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines is best read as a novel that interrogates a political consciousness baptised in the crucible of national divides. This theme resonates with concerns and orientations linked with emergence of a New World situation brought about by a transformation within the capitalist world economy. The trans-nationalisation of the forces of production and the widening cosmopolitan scope of the market are rapidly pushing the world beyond familiar national dimensions. As the capital flows across the continent more freely than ever before and with a ferocious velocity hitherto never witnessed, the surface of the earth seems to be shrinking. A global village that claims to bypass even eclipse the national state is forging its way into prominence as the nation seems to have become too small to contain within itself the global sweep of modern life. This research paper is a modest attempt to see how in his novel The Shadow Lines Amitav Ghosh attempts to create an image of global inclusiveness in which various cultures intermingle with one another to create a single unified global picture. It will also take into account how The Shadow Lines has moved a long way from the totalising narrative of homogenised community as discernible in Raja Rao's Kanthapura and its ilk.

Key Words: Homogenised Community, Global Village, Global Inclusiveness, Political Consciousness, Capitalism.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is a highly innovative, complex and celebrated novel. Published in 1988, it received the prestigious Sahitya Akademy Award in the following year. It is best read as a novel that interrogates a political consciousness baptised in the crucible of nation divides. This theme resonates with concerns and orientations linked with the emergence of a New World situation brought about by a transformation within the capitalist economy. The trans-nationalisation of the forces of production and the widening cosmopolitan scope of the market are rapidly pushing the world beyond familiar national dimensions. As capital flows across continent more freely than ever before and with a ferocious velocity hitherto never witnessed, the surface of the earth seems to be shrinking. A global village that claims to bypass even eclipse the national state is forging its way into prominence, as the nation seems to have become too small to contain within itself the global sweep of modern life. The category of the nation as the structural basis of community formation seems to be losing its defining and determining hold.

The most significant effect of this New World situation is that it has resulted in a reorganisation of the earlier conceptualisation of social relationship particularly those in which the nation was taken for granted as the structural unit of political organisation. Amitav Ghosh's narrative

which tears from one part of the globe to another with breath-taking speed collecting in the process within its global sweep artefact and experiences from a different civilization and culture is a fictional rendering of such an international credo. It is a potent expression of a new civilizational ethos conditioned by the overwhelming dynamics of globalisation set into motion and propelled by the irresistible forces of international capitalism. It is only in this context of this New World situation that Ghosh's incisive criticism of national borders gathers significance and relevance. This article seeks to document through a close reading of the text how Ghosh embarks on an endeavour to systematically deconstruct the category of the nation and the processes through which a sense of national identity is formed.

Benedict Anderson in his influential work *Imagined Community*¹ argues that the community is imagined into existence *i.e.*, a sense of community whether of a tribe or larger entity called nation must be first imagined for it to be real. The Indian novel in English from its conception in colonial India attempted to crystalize a sense of nationhood as a means to come to terms with colonial subjugation. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1936) is a prime example of such a literary endeavour. In this fictional account, Raja Rao generates a nationalistic discourse and constructs a unitary sense of nationalised identity necessitated by the priorities and strategies of the freedom struggle. Historically trapped in the need to project a homogenous community, Raja Rao pens the story of the inhabitants of Kanthapura inspired by a local prototype of Gandhi ji and willingly overlook their diversities and join hands against the British. But with the coming of Independence such a homogenising narrative shaped by the twin impulses of nationalism and colonialism begins to fizzle out and by the time we reach Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) the national ideal begins to be reconstructed and subverted. Rather than laying an insistence on a homogeneous identity, Rushdie offers a history of the nation not through a unilinear narrative, but in terms of disruption and discontinuity (in all its magnificent cruelty). His novel has been diagnosed as a plural narrative that explodes the notion of the nation having a stable identity. It does so without discarding the nation but by drawing attention to the glorious multiplicity of this entity. He is perhaps venturing to recuperate the silenced (submerged) history of those communities that lie on the margin of the homogenous narrative of the Indian nation.

In case of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* what is posited as an ideal form of existence is a world beyond nation. The coming into being of such a world would be highly desirable from the point of view of the forces of international capitalism for such a world would be automatically imply the establishment of a global market that tends to impede the free flow of commodities across the communities. In fact, the dynamics of globalisation is so overwhelming and the tendency of the nations to submit themselves to the power of capital is so obvious and commonplace that, Eric Hosbown, the most eminent of the contemporary of the Anglophone sociologists, even goes to the extent of locating the nation on a declining curve of historical viability. He argues that the nation is no longer a potent vector of historical development. But the developments in Eastern Europe during the last decade of 20th century and the various identity movements plaguing the earth demonstrate

the myopic nature of Hosbown's claim. In Ghosh there appears to be an awareness of this limitation of Hosbown's argument for he realises the utopian dimension of the ideal of the world beyond nations. At the end of the novel Tridib who aspires to become a global citizen – a man without a country - meets his tragic end at the hands of a rioting mob in Dhaka. His vision seems to succumb to the brute forces of reality and it ultimately acquires a mythic rather than a realistic and implausible stature.

Despite being amply aware of the utopian dimension of a notion of the globe free from national divides *The Shadow Lines* interrogates the process through which a sense of national identity is constructed. The construction of the sense of a national identity is the result of a dual dynamics - one which is homogenising and other which is differentiating. In order to establish a sense of unity within the nation it is necessary to project the image of the entire community as unified, single and homogeneous. At the same time, it is also imperative to differentiate this community from the other communities of the world. For example, if a sense of Indianness is to be created, all Indians are projected as brothers and sisters - members of a single unified family sharing a common past and moving towards a shared future having similar goals and aspirations. On the other hand, these are different from those of other countries. To be an Indian means not to be a Pakistani, French, an American, a British or a German and so on. Amitav Ghosh seems to demonstrate an intuitive understanding of this dynamics of nation and he strikes at its very roots showing that these are misleading constructs – illusions that people are fed on.

Is nation a homogeneous entity? This is a fundamental question that *The Shadow Lines* raises. It also furnishes the reader with a univocal answer – a firm and emphatic 'No'. Talking about the reasons for writing this novel Amitav Ghosh had revealed in a leading American magazine that the ghastly events that followed the assassination of Mrs Indira Gandhi (1984) had deeply pained him. He was unable to understand how a community that was essentially Indian - the Sikhs could be made the victims of such an inhuman massacre by their own non-Sikh countrymen. This incident had convinced him that there were deep fissures within the body polity of the Indian nation and it was this incident that inspired him to write *The Shadow Lines*. Though the riots that erupted in the aftermath of Mrs Gandhi's assassination are not mentioned in the novel, there are a number of incidents that the novel narrates that shatter the notion of India as a homogeneous community. In 1964 the Hazratbal shrine in Srinagar had been defiled. Consequently, communal riots had sparked off throughout the country. The unnamed narrator of *The Shadow Lines* was a school going boy then. But he could remember the incident quite vividly. Two communities, that is, the Hindus and the Muslims that had lived in a relative harmony were now suspicious of each other. Rumours that one community had poisoned the water supply to exterminate the other community were fresh and circulating. The atmosphere was filled not only with suspicion but also with fear and hatred. Before the riots the narrator's best friend was the boy from the Muslim community called Montu (Mansur). But the panic and communal hatred that had gripped the entire nation had transformed this best friend into a feared enemy. Instances of internal divides within the supposedly homogeneous body polity of

the nation punctuate the narrative of the novel with a frequent regularity that forces the reader to ponder about the unified nature of the country he lives in.

Not only is the nation portrayed as being an internally fractured entity, Ghosh also takes great pain to demonstrate that the public chronicle of the nation is at odds with the private stories of the individual. In the riots of 1964, the narrator's uncle Tridib had become 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 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 fails to find a mention of Tridib's death in the newspapers. It seemed as if his private story had no place in the records of the nation's memory. It seemed to have dropped out of memory into the 'crater of a volcano of silence'. It seems as if Ghosh is making a telling point - the story of the individual is swallowed by the history of the nation and in an age of agonistic individualism this tendency to erase the individual should not only be carefully guarded but also fearlessly exposed and severely censored.

Ghosh's novel traces the growth and evolution of its unnamed narrator's consciousness from his childhood belief that national borders have 'a corporeal substance [...] that across the border there exists another reality', to the mature realization in adulthood that this belief was a mirage. The novel documents in minute details the deceptive nature of national borders that are constructed to project an image of difference across political divides. The narrator's grandmother, whose psyche was conditioned during the days of India's freedom struggle, firmly believes in the ability of national borders to differentiate her own community from the other communities. The narrator treats this living embodiment of fossilised nationalism with mocking affection. Thamma's nationalistic beliefs seem to be undermined as the novel unfolds. In 1964 as she plans her visit to Dhaka. She wonders whether she would be able to see the borders between India and East Pakistan from the plane. Her grandson mocks at this thought and asks if the border was a long black line with a green on one side and scarlet on the other as shown in the school atlas. With this question she replies, 'of course not. But surely there is 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'? The grandmother's expectation of the visibility of the borders between India and East Pakistan may sound to be absurd but her concepts can be sympathetically understood as she had experienced the traumatic events of the partition. As the novel unfolds, the grandmother is forced to realise that the two sides of the border were merely the mirror images of each other. They were not different in any sense. This realisation forces her to interrogate the very purpose of the nationalist cause and the reasons of war between the nations.

"But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where is the difference then? And if there is no difference, both sides will be the same; it will 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"?²

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 politicians and nothing else as they cannot enforce cultural difference nor they can separate the two communities living across the border. Something or the other will always connect India to East Pakistan and Calcutta to Dhaka. No wonder the grandmother's old uncle refuses to leave Dhaka and migrate to India. This apparently senile old man seems to come forward as the sanest voice in the novel.

“Once you start moving you never stop. That's what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: 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 ever have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I will die here”.³

The absurdity of the partition is a governing concern of this novel and Ghosh's narrative reiterates this theme over and over again. The story of the partition of the grandmother's ancestral house in Dhaka is a metaphorical and comic rendering of this theme. When Tha'mma was still a young child this house had been partitioned with the dividing lines going through doorways and the level lavatory bisecting an old commode. Even the old name plate had been partitioned into two. This rather farcical act calls into question the logic of the political division of the nation. The partition of the country is therefore projected in the novel as an act of meaningless violence. Suvir Kaul rightly points out that in *The Shadow Lines* there is a “growing sense that the logic of the nation state is necessarily at odds with various forms of sub-continental communality - that to be Indian is to be perversely and perhaps unsuccessfully define oneself against one's mirror image from across the border”.⁴

Ghosh further illustrates this theme by demonstrating that identical realities exist across territorial division which was originally meant to mark differences. When still a child both the grandmother and her sister visualised the other side of the partitioned house as being upside down - and inverted image of their part of the house. But when the two returned to Dhaka to rescue their uncle they are presently surprised to find out that on the other side of the line there existed an identical reality. Category of difference and otherness is thus presented as a deceptive construct, as a fabrication of the human mind, as an illusion without any grounding realities. In the novel the national frontiers are described as 'looking-glass borders' that create an image of otherness only to see it reflected.

Central to the conception of the novel is the attempt to deconstruct not the quite dialectical logic of identity (internal homogeneity within the nation) and difference that defines the parameter and essence of national identity. Born in Dhaka and forced to migrate to Calcutta as a consequence of the bloodshed of the partition, Tha'mma feels that her sense of political identity - that being an Indian citizen - is at odds with her nostalgic longing for her roots that lies outside the political and geographical boundaries of India in Dhaka. It is this psychic confusion that is comically rendered in her inability to adequately describe her trip to Dhaka. Though she is going to Dhaka, she says that

she is coming to Dhaka. This is because she views her journey to Dhaka as a homecoming. But Tridib's death at the hands of the rioting mob in Dhaka changes her attitude towards the place of her birth. Her nostalgic longing for her city of origin gives way to a sense of hatred. Kill every one of them is what she says after listening to the news about the Indo-Pakistan war on the radio. She even goes to the extent of giving donation to the War Fund. If the individual attitude toward the land can change so easily over a period of time, then how can the category of nation be treated as the determining and defining structure of community formation? The endless queue of the individuals seeking immigration to a new country for a better future in today's world really seems to undermine the influence that the nation has over its inhabitants. In this age of diaspora, the nation is not a permanent but merely a transient category of belonging. What is most remarkable is that the other structure of community formation like religion also exercises a gripping hold over individual even across a national divide. The desecration of the Hazratbal shrine in Srinagar sparks off the communal frenzy not only in Calcutta but also beyond the geographical or political boundaries of India in Dhaka. An event that takes place in another country leads to a significant reprisal in one's own. Religion in these novel exercises a hold that defies national boundaries and is able to evoke a sense of loyalty and belonging that supersedes the one generated by nation.

The narrator is forced to ponder on these issues and he is ultimately made to realise the shortcoming of a political organisation of the world structured on the basis of national divides. If Ghosh is interrogating the nation as the structural basis of international relation, then what is the alternative that he is providing? In *The Shadow Lines* he attempts to create an image of global inclusiveness in which various cultures intermingle with one another to create a single unified global picture. The rain forest near Rai Bazaar is imported from Brazil and Congo. The global sweep of Ghosh's narrative is remarkable and it is not even matched by the encyclopaedic knowledge of Tridib, or by the incessant travel of globetrotting Ila. In this way it can be seen that *The Shadow Lines* has moved a long way from the totalising narrative of homogenised community discernible in Raja Rao's *Knathapura*. This change in a novelist's attitude towards the nation is but natural, for Ghosh lives not in days of India's freedom struggle: he is a citizen of a rapidly shrinking world; the subjectivity that he constructs in the novel is no doubt an elitist cosmopolitan Indian subjectivity conditioned by the imperative of his globetrotting class and we, therefore, should guard ourselves against the hegemonic tendencies of international capitalism that seeks to feed its own interest by disembedding the individual from the culture to which he belongs.

REFERENCES

1. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Community*, first edn., London, 1983, revised and extended edn., London, 1991.
2. Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, Ravi Dayal Publishers, Delhi, 1988. p. 67.
3. *Ibid.*, 103.
4. Suvir Kaul, "Separation Anxiety: Growing up Inter/National in *the Shadow Lines*", in Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, educational edn. (New Delhi: OUP, 1995), p.280.