

Deconstructing the Dialectics of Difference: Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

Pawan Kumar Sharma

While addressing 75th session of Indian History Congress on 28th December, 2014, Dr Hamid Ansari, Vice President of India, cautioned the historians against propagating a homogenous national identity, since the idea of a homogenous nation state is clearly problematic' (*The Tribune*, 29th Dec., 2014). The history of the Indian subcontinent has been a witness to this shifting and shuffling idea of identity over the years. These differing narratives of identity created grounds for the division of pre-independence India into two nations and caused further disintegration of Pakistan with the creation of a new state Bangladesh. There have also been other secessionist voices raising a clamour for separatism on the basis of claims constituted on ethnic, racial or linguistic lines, thus creating seeds of conflict within already established units. A close critical appraisal of the Postcolonial literature too foregrounds a tremendous amount of tensions and complexities around the very interpretative axis of the term 'identity' and its epistemological framework. What one witnesses there is a wide range of variation in the constructed narratives of identity, supposedly founded on the basis of national and cultural similarities. It is these shifts and stresses which the writers of the new literature often attempt to underline through their creative narratives.

Amitav Ghosh, a writer of Postcolonial imagination, makes an earnest attempt to locate traces of disruptions in the idea of the purity of cultural identities. For him this idea has always been changing and contested throughout the evolutionary processes of history. Thus the idea always remains an open, unending process without any finality or closure. Ghosh's writings offer a truly 'transnational' perspective which constantly subverts the idea of cultural purity. Ghosh, who can easily be called a cultural tourist for his frequent movements across national frontiers, brings a unique insight into the processes of cultural construction and representation.

The Shadow Lines (1988), a fictional work by Amitav Ghosh, offers an elaborate account of the concepts of home and identity through the relocation of cultural and national borders. The border, by its very definition, foregrounds a dialectics of difference based on the 'regime of othering'. Homi Bhabha, an eminent Postcolonial thinker, too underlines this fact that "in the postcolonial text the problem of identity returns as a persistent questioning of the frame, the space of representation, where the image ... is confronted with its difference, its other (46)". Yuri Lotman, a well known Russian Semiotician, too suggests that every culture "begins by dividing the world into 'its own' internal space and 'their' external space (131)". However, *The Shadow Lines* makes a very strong and sustained argument that these spaces and boundaries are continuously contested, always constructing new possibilities for renegotiation. Ghosh emphatically rejects the dialectics of difference behind the division of the Indian subcontinent. The unnamed protagonist of his novel, *The Shadow Lines* moves through the ruins of divided Bengal to relocate lost connections and "indivisible sanity that binds people to each other independently of their governments" (SL 225).

The novel presents the life tale of an Indian family. The family had experienced the horrible reality of communal violence which ultimately resulted in the division of Bengal. Amitav Ghosh tries to explore the dialectics of difference from the experiences of the members of the family who move across multiple cultural and geographical locations namely Calcutta, London and Dhaka. The narrator, his grandmother Thamma and her sister Mayadebi, though born in Dhaka, are now settled in Calcutta after having been forced out during Partition. There are other relations forged between the narrator's family and the British family of Lionel Tresawsen. When the narrator's grand-aunt, Mayadebi, along with her husband and son, Tridib, go to London in 1939, the connections with the English family are revived through Tresawsen's daughter, Elizabeth Price. Later on, Mrs. Price's daughter May and Tridib fall in love with each other. In 1964, Mayadebi and Thamma, fly to their birthplace of Dhaka to bring back an old uncle whose life is in danger. May and Tridib also join them. Tribib unfortunately becomes a victim of Hindu-Muslim communal riots when he tries to rescue his aged relative from a Muslim mob. The tragic death of Tribib affects the lives of the entire family. Seventeen years later, the narrator meets May in England. They together try to come to terms with the reasons behind Tridib's death.

Thus the novel appears to be structured around a cluster of human relationships. These relations transcend geo-political boundaries. Ghosh, while underlining the significance of human relationships, bases the central dynamics of the novel on the logic of the self and the other. The narrator tries to deconstruct the dialectics of difference to understand the historical and political dimensions to identity. This is eloquently articulated by Tridib when he expresses "a longing for everything that was not in oneself - that carried one beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and other places, and ... to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror (SL 29)". This is probably to this end that the narrator has not been given any name by the writer. The lack of a name metaphorically symbolizes the lack of ontological value in the egocentric self. The full conception of identity can only be realized, as the text suggests, at the point where the shadow of the other falls upon the self.

The Shadow Lines underlines the fact that an ontological self based on the 'logic of othering' is an irrational construct. The novel explicitly suggests that the logic of binaries sets in motion the fear of the other which creates conditions for communal hatred. This imaginary divide on communal ground subverts the very idea of the conceptual unity of India. Thamma's hysterical articulation reflects it when she says: "We (the Indians) have to kill them (the Pakistanis) before they kill us; we have to wipe them out', she screams, 'We're fighting them properly at last, with tanks and guns and bombs' (SL 232)." Though Thamma has fully accepted the fact that "across the border there existed another reality' (SL 214), yet she fails to find any dialectics of difference. She exclaims: "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 What was it all for then - Partition and all the killing and everything - if there isn't something in between (SL 148-49)". For the narrator who too "grew up believing ... in the reality of borders", the lesson learnt is that the boundary is only a constructed reality, not "a corporeal substance" (SL 214).

The Shadow Lines clearly upholds the view that cultural and religious identities are not a set of authentic and autonomous entities, but are rational constructs, dependent on political, social and economic circumstances. This is powerfully demonstrated in the text when the communal riots of 1964 break out in Calcutta, and the narrator's best friend, his classmate, Mansur, turn into an enemy, the Muslim other. Thus within the broader context of religious extremism in India that Tridib occupies a space of special significance within the novel. Tridib, "a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman-across the seas" (SL 183), represents a humane desire for fluidity on the issue of identity. If Thamma articulates an exclusionary nationalism, based on the notion of 'roots', Tridib symbolises the centrifugal trajectory of routes that takes one beyond "the limits of one's mind to other times and other places" (SL 28) to seek an alternative vision of cultural connections across and beyond nationalist discourse. Tribib, as a representative voice of the author, attempts to construct a new aesthetics which interrogates the unities of nationalism based on polarized identities. However the fact that he ultimately becomes a victim of communal violence, his throat slit 'from ear to ear' (SL 245), clearly underlines the other side of the horrible reality that exist in the form of religious and cultural difference.

The novel has two sections, 'Going Away' and 'Coming Home', which describe Tridib's journey to England in 1939 and Thamma's journey to Dhaka in 1964. However this is "a journey that was a search for precisely that fixed point which permits the proper use of verbs of movement (SL 150). When Thamma says that she would "come home to Dhaka", the narrator makes fun of his grandmother for not knowing "the difference between coming and going (SL 150)". Thamma has a "fixed and settled" (SL 150) reference point to her conception of home, whereas, for Ghosh, home is an ambivalent space. When Thamma returns to Dhaka, she discovers that Dhaka, the place of her birth, has now become the other of home where she is now a 'foreigner', the hated Hindu other. She discovers that displaced people like herself have been "vomited out of their native soil" by the carnage of Partition and "dumped hundreds of miles away" (Ghosh 59). People like her have "no home but in memory (SL 190)". Her home now exists only in the stories of her childhood that she tells her grandson about the place of her birth.

On the other hand, position of the narrator's uncle, Tridib, is quite antithetical to Thamma's view point. For Tridib, home is not the bounded site, but invented through the endless and multiple processes of knowledge cutting across oppositional boundaries in search of difference and similarities. For him home "does not merely exist, it has to be invented in one's imagination (SL 21)". Tridib's conception of home is enshrined within his imaginative faculty which freely moves beyond temporal and spatial boundaries so as to dismantle the dialectics of difference inherent in the cultural construction of reality. The dismantling of this logic of oppositional binaries creates a space for 'human' intervention, where the interactive and overlapping effects of culture are easily located. The narrator acknowledges the importance of having a wider vision of humanity: "Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with" (SL 20). The narrator understands that there is something more complex, "something truer", to the fixed and unchanging, ontological, reality of map points to learn "the meaning of distance (SL 227)". The text projects, through the

narrator, a certain kind of thinking that rejects the polarities of a world constructed out of a “tidy ordering of Euclidian space (SL 227)”. The narrator rejects the idea that the borders and maps have lost their ability to define the spatial and temporal complexities of nations. Although, he, like Thamma, grew up believing in the reality of fixed spaces and boundaries, the grown up narrator has now come to realize the urgency to redraw the map on the basis of his new understanding about the notion of home and identity. For Ghosh, prevailing nationalistic discourse conceptualized around demarcated boundaries, separations and divisions between oneself and one’s image in the mirror imposes false distances. The narrator looks at the issue of identity in more inclusive terms. He now believes that ‘Muslim Dhaka’ and ‘Hindu Calcutta’ are essentially mirror-images of each other; the cause for the riots that killed Tridib in Dhaka was also the cause for the Calcutta riots in which he was trapped as a child. The narrator realizes that boundaries do not necessarily make separate entities: “I, in Calcutta, only had to look in the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment where each city was the inverted image of the other (SL 228)”. Thus the novel also quite implicitly offers a Postcolonial critique of the idea of nationalism, whose “lines drawn in sands still haunt Third World geographies (Shohat 99)”.

The Shadow Lines deconstructs the myth of unities constructed around the concept of belongingness in political, ethnic or geographical terms. The novel exposes the concept of home and belongingness to be a site of continuous and multiple contestations. Thamma and many others like her have been not only the witnesses but also the victims of the traumatic history of Partition. These displaced victims, in a sense, have lost, what Edward Said calls, “their roots, their land, their past (51)”. For these unfortunate victims home becomes the traumatic site of cultural reconstruction. This process of reconstruction, on its way, also subverts many inherited assumptions, including the overriding premise that the home always-already exists. With the disruptive discovery dawning upon her that “her place of birth (had) come to be so messily at odds with her nationality (SL 149)”, Thamma is left with no other option but to reconstruct and reconceptualize home in the by-lanes of her mind.

The cosmopolitan, progressive character of Ila, too, tries to confront the issue of home and identity, though in quite a different location and place. Ila, a Bengali by birth, lives in London on her own terms. She is inextricably trapped between the two cultures. The novel focuses on Ila’s anxieties about being rejected by the Western culture that she strives to embrace while she, at the same time, consciously rejects her native Bengali culture. Consequently she is viewed as the ‘other’ by her Bengali relatives in India for being on the other side of her cultural origin. However, Ila also faces racial discrimination at the hands of the dominant national narrative in England. Despite working hard to make a life for herself in London, Ila does not feel a sense of belonging. Even her marriage to Nick Price, an Englishman fails to alleviate her sense of exclusion and marginalization by the dominant white cultural narrative. Ila has started believing in “the centrality and eloquence” in the Eurocentric concepts of knowledge as the only vehicle of progressive ideas. She dismisses the colonized culture as inconsequential because “nothing really important ever happens ... in Nigeria, India, Malaysia, wherever (SL 102)”. Whereas Tridib makes his tours and travels as the basis of his imaginative reconstruction of other people and places, Ila’s tendencies are

shaped by the Eurocentric, linear perspective to identity. Lacking precise imagination, she is trapped in somebody else's interpretative process, somebody else's construction of reality which ultimately leads to her entrapment and inability to effectively negotiate a home and identity for herself. She is constantly tormented by unease that having repudiated her native culture, she is in turn repudiated by the Western culture to which she longs to belong. Despite all her efforts to integrate herself into the Western modes of living, Ila is constantly confronted with the image of herself as England's racial and cultural other.

Thus *The Shadow Lines* does not provide any central point of reference through which one can mediate and negotiate the issues of identity and belongingness. There are multiple voices and differing perspectives which contest for sure space throughout the narrative. However the readers can well recognize as the story unfolds that it is the narrator's voice and consciousness which constantly mediate and dominates other voices, other memories and other experiences. It is Ghosh's narrator who speaks the privileged language of 'truth'. Ghosh's construction of aesthetics in the novel tries to create a textual space that defines the nation and national experience not through a totalizing consciousness but through the presence of other, often contending, versions of cultural and national identity. It makes his aesthetics much more inclusive and authentic. In the novel, the grandmother, Thamma, defends the need for wars with enemies located outside national boundaries because it makes 'people forget that they are born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood'. But for her there is no place for riots within the boundaries of a unitary entity called nation. Communal or ethnic violence within nation states merely signifies the other reality that puts aside neat arrangements determined by unambiguous dichotomies based on inside/outside, sameness/difference, we/others.

Amitav Ghosh, in *The Shadow Lines*, also uses an analogy of cricket match to put across his point of view on the issue. The cricket test-match played on 10 January 1964 between England and India, in which Budhi Kunderan scores a maiden century, is still fresh in the memory of the Indians. However the horrible killings of innocent people in the Calcutta-Dhaka riots that took place at the same time have totally eclipsed from their memory. Through this, the text demonstrates that while cricket symbolizes a nationalist sentiment among Indians, the 1964 Hindu-Muslim riots are deliberately exorcised from the collective imagination because the violence exemplified by the riots serve to undermine the dominant narrative of a unified national identity. The narrator ruefully comments: "the riots had faded away from ... the collective imagination ... vanished without leaving a trace in the histories and bookshelves. They had dropped out of memory into a crater of a volcano of silence" (SL 226). His frantic attempts – "But don't you remember? ... Surely you remember – you must remember?" (SL 216) – try to give voice to those "unnameable things" (SL 223) that motivates and sustains the form and flow of his narrative. The text asserts that these effaced memories are quite essential for the reconstruction of a more authentic notion of unity and identity.

Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* makes a very powerful intervention in reimagining official nationalist narrative in an attempt to relocate the multiple layers of the suppressed histories. With an intention to construct a new aesthetics based on the acceptance of the 'other', the novel uncovers and brings to memory one of the most

traumatic, but the 'forgotten fact' of the violent consequences of the subcontinent's dismemberment, specifically in the form of the 'minor riots' within India and Bangladesh. This new aesthetics is based on a humane idea where the differences and dissimilarities are not a threat to national identity but have to be viewed as a catalyst to the establishment of a genuinely modern and progressive polity. The novel upholds the Postcolonial view that the boundary is that line "where the shadow of the other falls upon the self (Bhabha 60)". This perspective constructs identity through a negotiation, not suppression, of difference. This, fundamentally, is the theme that the novel imparts to its readers. A nation is not so much defined on the basis of the artificially constructed dialectics of difference, but by split spaces where cultures meet and overlap as much as they separate. Thus the dynamics of Ghosh's new aesthetics in *The Shadow Lines* evokes an 'intervening space' in which the transnational and cosmopolitan sense of the communities will displace the idea of a pure and ethnically cleansed national citizenry. The relevance of *The Shadow Lines* lies in its genuine, humanist impulse to surmount the problems of political and cultural division in India, which stem from the inflexible and absolutist positions on home and identity. Ghosh's narrative earnestly urges its readers of the Indian subcontinent to realize the complexities of their national-cultural identity, which is constructed as much by similarities as by the differences within, as much by continuities as by the continuous contestations. It leaves the readers with a liberating impulse by giving them an enlightened sense of the self.

Works Cited

- Amitav Ghosh. *The Shadow Lines* (SL in parenthesis). London: Bloomsbury, 1988.
- Amitav Ghosh, *The Circle of Reason*, London : Granta, 1986, p. 59.
- Ansari, Hamid. *The Tribune*. 29th Dec., 2014
- Homi Bhabha, "Interrogating Identity: Frantz Fanon and the Postcolonial Prerogative". *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge: 1994).
- Said, Edward. "The Mind of Winter: Reflections on Life in Exile". *Harper's Magazine*. September 1984. 49-55.
- Shahat, Ella. "Notes on the Post-colonial". *Social Text*. 31/32. 99-113
- Yuri M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* . London: Tauris. 1990.