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Illusion Of Borders And Reality Of Partition: A Critical Analysis Of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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ABSTRACT

Borders and boundaries, drawn for political or geographical reasons tend to separate one nation from the other thereby giving rise to the concepts of nation, nationality and nationhood. There seem to be incredulity and ludicrousness about the concept of partition as they create a sense of 'false nationalism' which leads to nothing but chaos. This painful exodus causes immense torture- both mental and physical- which in turn destroys a person's world, identity and voice. Amitav Ghosh's novel, *The Shadow Lines* not only focuses on the cruel aspect of partition which is undoubtedly as harrowing as Holocaust but at the same clarifies that borders and boundaries that separate people are mere 'shadow', nothing more than artificial lines created by politicians.

Therefore, it is author's contention in this novel that these borders are fictive and illusive and they tend to negate the very reason behind their ostensible existence. Being a memory novel it triggers nostalgia and at the same time sketches a few historical events like the partition of India in 1947, freedom movement of Bengal and communal riots in Bangladesh. Ghosh makes visible the bodily and psychic violence caused by these historical events in which people become disoriented and completely lose sense of home. It eventually leads to the breakdown of families, loss of identity, madness and merciless killing of innocent people. Furthermore, the narrator shuttles between past and present symbolizing that we cannot demarcate space and time. Therefore the author appeals for a border less universe- universe divided by shadow line.

Border, did you say?
How many miles to the border?
Sure we don't know where it starts
or ends up here, except we're lost...

John Montague

You remember that village where the border ran
Down the middle of the street,
With the butcher and baker in different states?
Today he remarked how a shower of rain
Had stopped so cleanly across Golightly's lane
It might have been a wall of glass

That had toppled over. He stood there, for ages,
To wonder which side, if any, he should be on.

Paul Muldoon

These lines reflect how a political division can seem utterly meaningless from a personal point of view. There seems to be incredulity and ludicrousness about the concept of Partition in both the poems, as is also the case in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. Borders and boundaries primarily drawn for political or geographical reasons, separating one nation from another tend to give rise to the concept of nation and nationality. However, unfortunately these boundaries can create a sense of 'false nationalism'. Amitav Ghosh in the novel *The Shadow Lines* not only announces the arbitrariness of the borders drawn between nations, but at the same time talks about the torture they inflict, magnifying the pain leading to the complete destruction of a person's world, identity and voice. It also causes a sense of displacement, dislocation and sense of non-belongingness.

According to the information provided by [Wikipedia](#), Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta on 11 July 1956 in a Bengali Hindu family, to Lieutenant Colonel Shailendra Chandra Ghosh, a retired officer of the pre-independence Indian Army. His first job was at the Indian Express newspaper in New Delhi. Ghosh lives in New York with his wife, Deborah Baker, senior editor at Little, Brown and Company. They have two children, Lila and Nayan. He has been a Fellow at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta and Centre for Development Studies in Trivandrum. In 1999, Ghosh joined the faculty at Queens College, City University of New York, as Distinguished Professor in Comparative literature. He has also been a visiting professor to the English department of Harvard University since 2005. Ghosh subsequently returned to India began working on the Ibis trilogy, of which two volumes have been published to date, *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*.

Amitav Ghosh won much acclaim for his first novel, *The Circle of Reason* published in 1986. The other novels to his credit are, *The Shadow Lines*, *In an Antique Land*, *The Calcutta Chromosome* and *The Glass Palace*. He has also written many literary essays, short stories, travelogues and articles. As a novelist, he narrates the experiences of people, the societies and their inter relationship in his works.

An attempt has been made through this paper to explore this concept further. *The Shadow Lines* besides focusing on the cruel subject of Partition, which is undoubtedly as harrowing as the Holocaust, clarifies that the borders that separate people are mere 'shadows', nothing more than artificial lines created by the politicians of the day. This novel hovers between reality and imagination. The narrator so deftly shuttles between past and present and also between the pre-partition India and London making his point clear that we cannot demarcate space and time. Therefore, the author appeals for a border less universe- universe divided by 'shadow lines.'

The novel under study is a memory novel. So, through 'nostalgia' the author sketches few historical events like the Partition of India in 1947, the freedom movement in Bengal, communal riots in Bangladesh and the Second World War. It is famous for its debate on Partition as Khushwant Singh observes: "It's the best work on Partition. It operates at many levels, memories, boundaries et al that one is totally soaked in his narrative."

The literature of the 20th century depicts a sense of isolation, alienation and loss. Novelists, unlike historians have fully addressed human agonies which accompanied the Partition of the Indian subcontinent. The pain of Partition is too deep to be overlooked. It did not solve any problem rather created more. So, this painful episode wreaked havoc in the life of millions of innocent people who witnessed the specter of Partition. This novel recognizes and acknowledges the violence-both physical and mental, in the lives of the people who lived through it. Suvir Kaul in his essay comments about the novel:

At the origin of India and Pakistan lies the national trauma of Partition, a trauma that freezes fear into silence, and for which *The Shadow Lines* seeks to find a language, a process of mourning and perhaps even a memorial. (283)

The Shadow Lines was published in 1988, exactly after the assassination of Prime Minister of India –Mrs. Indira Gandhi. India witnessed heavy uproar and wide spread violence and heavy civil disturbances and dislocation in India. There was lot of destruction and devastation. During that time, Ghosh was teaching in Delhi University Campus and the characters and storyline of this novel bear the imprints of communal violence and national boundaries drawn and re-drawn. This is the second novel by the writer and is considered a masterpiece. On the surface, this novel is eminently international in all the ways. Its story-line is woven around two families, the Datta- Chowdharys of Bengal and the Prices of London. Three generations are a part of this storyline. It primarily focuses on the idea of freedom and man's longing for content and peaceful living.

There are riots and general mass slaughter which affect the characters in The Shadow Lines. Ghosh has mastery over his characterization whereby he has created the characters, according to which the demarcation of lines – boundaries of nation and bifurcation of nation made by political credo can divide nations but these lines cannot divide a memory as Tha'mma and her old uncle believe. The character of narrator, though unnamed, plays vital role in the novel. The writer leads the reader to believe that narrator is Tha'mma's grandson and is far more influenced by his uncle Tridib.

The novel is written in first person. Throughout the novel the narrator remains nameless. It would be quite appropriate to say that the novel is an account of the recollection of events that have taken place not in the life of the narrator but someone else's. The unnamed narrator tells the story in layers which is a mixture of private and public events working towards unity. The story starts thirteen years before the birth of the narrator and ends on the night before his departure from London back to his home. The novel begins as "in 1939, thirty years before I was born, my father's aunt Mayadebi went to England with her husband and her son Tridib." The narrator's grandmother feels restless and frustrated because she wants to go back to her ancestral home. Because of the specter of Partition, she was made to leave her ancestral house.

Family plays a pivotal role in a person's life. Life seems to crumble after breaking away from the family. In this novel we see the importance of relations coming to the fore, as is made evident by Tha'mma, the narrator's grandmother. She wishes to revisit Bangladesh and bring her uncle back. She wants to break down the walls which separate people from one another. Although before Partition they lived separately without any feeling of affinity, after partition that feeling of kinship arises very strongly in her. As a result, she wants to bring him back and look after him in his old age, as we hear the narrator mentions:

Poor old man, my grandmother said her voice trembling. Imagine what it must be like to die in another country, abandoned and alone in your old age. (135)

Also the narrator's mother has placed family at a very high pedestal in her life, "...because for her, relatives and family were central points which gave the world its shape and meaning; the foundations of moral order" (129).

Through the experience of poor and middle class female migrants, Ghosh makes visible the bodily and psychic violence in *The Shadow Lines*. People become disoriented and are displaced whereby they lose sense of home. There is complete loss of identity. Tha'mma, narrator's grandmother who decides to revisit her birth place, feels utterly bewildered when she is told that she would have to fill in a disembarkation card and other related forms. To her chagrin, she realizes that "her place of birth had come to be messily at odds with her nationality", as is evident in the following lines:

It was not till many years later that I realized it had suddenly occurred to her that she would have to fill in 'Dhaka' as her place of birth on the form, and that the prospect of this had worried her in the same way that dirty schoolbooks worried her- because she liked doing things to be neat and in place- and at that moment she had not been able to understand how her place of birth had come to be messily at odds with her nationality. (152)

Thus, Partition causes a lot of anxiety and distress among people. Tha'mma lives in a paralyzing dilemma as she is utterly confused about which place to call her own? Paul Muldoon's thought coincides with the grandmother's stance as depicted by the lines from his poetry, "He stood there for ages, / To wonder which side, if any, he should be on". She recalls her place of birth with great reverence at one point and at another feels scared to revisit that very place which she calls her 'home'. This is evident when she reviews her decision about visiting her ancestral home to bring her uncle back, "I don't know. I feel scared. Do you think it will be wise after all these years? It won't be like home anymore" (149).

And then at another place in the novel we observe that even though the house she lives in now is fairly large and comfortable yet she remembers her house in post Partition Dhaka with a profound sense of nostalgia. She feels there is something missing here. The ancestral house had become 'home' for her because it had grown over the years, both physically and in terms of relationships. There is a sense of homelessness when she reiterates and recapitulates:

It was a very odd house. It had evolved slowly, growing like a honeycomb, with every generation of Boses adding layers and extensions, until it was like a huge, lop-sided step-pyramid, inhabited by so many branches of the family that even the most knowledgeable amongst them had become a little confused about their relationships. (121)

The novel showcases frequent dislocation, both in thought and space which is considered to be one of the prominent features of a novel of Partition. There is always a sense of non-belonging. The Partitioned people undergo existential problems. Very aptly the narrator at one place says, "people like my grandmother, who have no home but in memory, learn to be very skilled in the art of recollection". Thus nostalgia is presented as an important characteristic of the novel as it is rightly said that present can never be understood without the past. Past, present and future combine and melt together in the novel, erasing any kind of demarcations. As T.S.Eliot befittingly and very intelligently explains in *Burnt Norton*, one of the poems from his set of *Four Quartets*:

Time present and time past
Are both present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.

In *The Shadow Lines* the action takes place on different continents- Europe, Asia and Africa and within different countries India, Bangladesh and England. There is a shift of time from past to present and from present to past. Present and future in a way are the offshoots of the past. Past appears to be of utmost importance as grandmother says, "Oh, we're not interested in anything as current as that...The Past is what we talk about" (127).

The novel is divided into two sections- Going Away and Coming Home. The former can be interpreted as going away from the self and the latter can be interpreted as coming back to the self. So there is a concept referred to as coming and going (not belonging) which is expressed as a part of the family's secret lore:

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 settled point to go away from and come back to, and 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. (153)

As a part of this coming and going Tha'mma becomes a witness to a very horrible scene when she visits Dhaka. In that visit both her aged uncle, Jethamoshai and her nephew, Tridib meet a tragic death. As a result, Tha'mma's visit to Dhaka can be said to be her hamartia as she pays a heavy price for that. The novel, thus examines the traumatic experience of Partition and its effect on human beings.

Hence, crossing borders becomes a painful experience in the novel. The country and the city where Tha'mma was born and brought up becomes an alien and inhospitable place. She feels more of a foreigner and for her Dhaka has long since disappeared into the past which she can visit only in her memory. She holds grudges against history in her mind as aptly summed up by Tridib:

...that was all she wanted- a modern middle class life, a small thing that history had denied her in its fullness and for which she could never forgive it. (78)

The author also echoes the idea of collective madness and normalcy through Tha'mma's uncle. He is the only one languishing in that house as he is completely out of touch with reality and therefore rejects the fact that the country has been partitioned. Whereas the uncle who refuses to believe in the Partition of the country is labeled mad by the so called normal people, it is in a way a collective madness that has approved the highly unusual act of Partition and then driven the non-conformists to the edge of madness. This old man clearly portrays the violence that history perpetrates. People who faced distress and dislocation during Partition found vent through the grotesque means of madness. Ironically, the means to escape from this madness is through madness.

This famous line from Margaret Mitchell's novel, *Gone with the Wind* says, "The people who have brain and courage come through and the ones who haven't are winnowed out" (517). This suggests that people who are stronger are better able to endure the devastation which occurs during the war whereas, the weaker ones wither under the immense hardships caused by war. In case of *Jethamoshai* it is clearly evident that the violence and Partition was no less than a monster that resulted in a lot of damage, not only on the physical level but also on the mental and psychological fronts. Directly or indirectly, it is the people who bear the brunt and suffer. It leads to complete disorientation of the lives of the people.

Consequently, violence-both physical and mental inflicted directly or indirectly eventually leads to the breakdown of families, loss of identity, madness and merciless killing of innocent people. But Ghosh also reveals the theme of borders' absurdity through Tridib, who believes that borders drawn by politicians do not really perform any function and are nothing more than being shadows. One might imagine that these borderlines would divide people, but strangely enough they seem to bring them closer together because their memories remain undivided.

The above argument can very well be supported by the usage of 'house' as an allegory of Partition in the very beginning of the novel. Tha'mma grew up in a big joint family but when her grandfather died the house was partitioned because of the conflict between her father and uncle. Although the divided house made two families move apart yet Partition brought them closer negating that line between the houses. This is evident when Tha'mma eagerly wants to bring back her uncle who belonged to the so called other part of the partitioned house. This clearly shows that those lines drawn are meaningless as far as emotions are concerned. Memories and emotions transcend this idea of imaginary division which is an absurd illusion and a basis of terrifying violence.

The idea of uselessness of borders is further discussed in the novel through three major characters - Tha'mma, Jethamoshai and Robi, Tha'mma's nephew. The aforementioned thought is clearly explained through the query made by the narrator's grandmother when she has to travel to Calcutta with her family in a plane, as "whether she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane" (151). When the grandmother is asked if she really thought about the border being a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on another like on a school atlas, she replies by saying that although she does not actually think it to be that way but surely there has to be something. Thus, she is not able to envision any border or line between the two countries and is rather looking for visible demarcations. She retorts:

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? (151)

Also, it becomes difficult for her to comprehend the idea that the border is not on the frontier but inside the airport. Shobha Tiwari in her book *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Study* comments:

Ghosh questions the very basis of modern nation states. It does not matter how many states exist in a continent. It does not change the well-being of its people. Nationhood itself is a mileage because it is not based on any logic. When nature draws line in the form of mountains, oceans, rivers, it is real. But manmade borders are shallow and unjustifiable. (48)

To repeat an earlier argument, this very point is clearly revealed by Jethamoshai. When Tha'mma persuades him to return to Calcutta to accompany his extended family he told her:

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. As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here. (215)

Jethamoshai's world is a place where the borders are not of radical import. However, what is regarded as essential is one's sense of belonging to a place, one was brought up in. Hence, there is a tone of finality in his concluding remark when he put his foot down and when he says he would like to die in the same place that he was born in. Thus, the characters display remarkable changeover, and all this is the outcome of the destruction and damage caused both physically and mentally.

Something of Jethamoshai's sentiment is later echoed by Robi almost after fifteen years. Taking into account Tridib's death in the riots on his visit to Dhaka, he reflects on the word 'freedom' since the root of all the problems seemed to lie there. He does not believe in arbitrary lines and is clever enough to realize that once a man starts to move, there is no end to it. His words seem to be prophetic for within less than a decade of their utterance, in 1971, East Pakistan became Bangladesh. According to *The Shadow Lines*, there is nothing between. As the hero later realizes:

I was a child, and like all the children around me, I grew up believing in the truth of the precepts that were available to me: I believed in the reality of space; I believed that distance separates, that it is a corporeal substance; I believed in the reality of nations and borders; I believed that across the border there existed another reality. The only relationship my vocabulary permitted between those separate realities was war or friendship. (152)

The novel therefore aptly presents the situation of middle class families entangled in the grave situation as they face acute violence and therefore strive hard to alleviate the suffering inflicted upon them. Their lives are torn apart and they are psychologically shattered to pieces. Their life crumbles down when they are forced to migrate from one country to another. Ghosh has very realistically put the episodes in the fore making the reader completely empathize with the characters of the novel. Though he does not vividly and elaborately describe violence and the butchered human bodies yet the effect is overwhelming.

The Shadow Lines is a novel about constant crossing and re-crossing the borders. The creation of these boundaries is entirely rejected by the author as their outcome is nothing but terrifying violence and misery. What this paper has explored is that Partition is no less than a monster that results in a lot of destruction and devastation, not only on the physical level but also on the psychological front. The ghost of bygone times continues to cling to those people who have been a witness to such occurrence. Ghosh showcases this notion very profoundly in his work, as memory forms the basis of the entire novel. It also makes the reader discover that the world is not a simple place that we see in the atlas but there are so many inexorable facts, veiled under those lines separating nations. The novel ends, but does not conclude. It raises serious questions concerning our roots and identities, in addition to relevance of war, riots, borders and 'shadow lines.'

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