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## **Socio-Political Views in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines***

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### **Abstract**

In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh explores the issue of national borders, the historical process by which they have come about, and the resulting ironies that affected people's lives at times in incomprehensible ways in the post-colonial era. It undercuts nationalism by questioning history, on which the idea of nation is constructed. The trauma of partition continues through three generations. The agonies of displacement, the sense of alienation in the adopted land, the constant dream to return to one's land, are the main themes of the novel. Ghosh has tried to stage his revelation about the aftermath of the evils of war and the lost identity of an individual tossed between both the natural disaster and artificial disaster which arises out of human selfish desires.

### **Keywords**

Socio-Political Views; Amitav Ghosh; *The Shadow Lines*.

India suffered the stigma of colonization under British for about three centuries. When it got freedom, it was also paying the high cost in the form of partition. This historical event is significant in the world history not only as a political occurrence which gave birth to two nations but as a most treacherous occasion for many people. “The Muslim majority regions of Punjab and Bengal were divided, with West Punjab and East Bengal forming West and East Pakistan and India sandwiched in the middle” (Kabir 178).

The natives were uprooted suddenly in that time. It was certainly a ghastly experience for them to give up their belongings and rush to a land which was not theirs. Indian writers could not remain untouched from this shocking affair and used the medium of creative writing especially novels to divulge the brutality, and inhumanity.

In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh explores the issue of national borders, the historical process by which they have come about, and the resulting ironies that affected people’s lives at times in incomprehensible ways in the post-colonial era. It undercuts nationalism by questioning history, on which the idea of nation is constructed. To understand the novel’s ‘nationalism’, one has to begin by analyzing its concept of nationalism. The center of focus, in *The Shadow Lines* is the partition of India and the consequent trauma on East Bengali psyche. The narrator, as a young boy, grew up in Calcutta and Delhi in post-partition India. The trauma of partition continues through three generations. The agonies of displacement, the sense of alienation in the adopted land, the constant dream to return to one’s land, are the main themes. “The border was a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other, like it was in a school atlas”(Sapra 63). It was the lure of freedom from the colonial rule that ingrained the feeling of ‘nationalism’ in the character Thamma. Her concept, ‘nationalism’ would be meaningless if it is not coupled with idea of fraternity. Her efforts to strengthen the unity of the country range from making girls in her school “cook one dish that has a specialty of some part of the country other than her own” (TSL 30). Sacrifice for the country is the ultimate unifying force.

The house across the partition line functions as an antithesis to Thamma's house. She draws a psychological as well as a philosophical boundary around herself and those who claim the same national identity. Therefore she is circumspect of any Indian who lives beyond the borders. Her endeavor to bring the poor old man from Dhaka to India is not born out of any family feelings. She had always founded her morality, schoolmistress like, in large and more abstract entities.

By highlighting the fact that even after partition there might not be any difference between the two regions across the border, the novel questions the ideology of nationalism. Thamma, initially keeps on asking where is Dhaka but realizes, although reluctantly that there is nothing upside down across the border. By stressing on identity rather than on the difference across the border, the novel questions the primordial view of nationalism- the view that grandmother holds. When she travels to Calcutta with her family in the plane, she naively asks, "Can I see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane" (TSL167).

The Bengali Diaspora has been dispersed to distant lands. Before the people could realize the political and social implications of the partition, they were swept off their feet by a wave of violence that swiftly became a tide. Hundreds of people were killed, raped and butchered on either side of the border, and for those who survived the catastrophe, the experience was so traumatic that the memories of those grief-stricken days haunted them for years together.

For millions of people, the independence of the country brought terrible but avoidable suffering and humiliation, a loss of human dignity and the frustrating sense of being uprooted. It is not what they had aspired for in the name of freedom-the partition was a dirty trick. Robert points out in his, *Nehru and the Language Politics of India*, "the force of nationalism in the quest for freedom or ideology is often a source of violence ... so the shadow lines between people and nations is often mere illusion" (205). Dhaka has been Thamma's birth place, but her nationality is Indian. As a young girl, she had thought of fighting

for freedom in East Bengal. But those were same people for whom she had been willing to lay down her life are enemies, now in 1964. Feelings of nationalism had after all motivated the fight against the British in Khulna. “A small thing that history had denied her in its fullness and for which she could never forgive it”. (Barat 115)

However, Thamma’s disillusionment increases when she has to mention her birthplace on the passport-form during her visit to Dhaka. Home ought to be the place where one was born and brought up, scaled by an emotions bond, where one can claim one’s right without a thought and without any hesitation. If there was a basic confusion on this score-about the very roots of one’s origin, an individual’s identity would be in question. Leaving Dhaka during the partition had obviously meant severing old roots for a new kind of stability and identity.

The novel questions the prevailing precepts and ethics which man inherits blindly. The political zeal and social freedom is no longer stale, exclusive, permanent and immutable as Thamma and Ila have believed. Man is free to decide a course of action, which is found to affect a whole group of people, a nation, and mankind. P.S. Ravi observes,

As the national movement gained momentum, subversive forces were hacking away at the very ideals on which it had grown. A wiser and saner counsel fails the specter of partition formed large on the horizon. People of various religions carried away by Pakistan and misplaced ideologies found it impossible to strike this difference and made the partition an unavailable reality.

Ghose engages with the limits of essentialist nationalism and barriers to empathy across geographical borders. The novel eventuates into a search for the strategies for survival in a violent, hate –filled world of narrow divisions and finds in love an effective antidote to the ethnic tension. Thus, the novel also addresses the challenge of geographical fluidity and cultural dislocations with a salutary insight into history. The cross-border movement of aliens and immigrants under the increasingly globalised scenario endorses, or rather validates, the novel’s

larger project of cultural accommodation, for making sense of ontological confusion in intricate specialty and seeking adjustment to the emerging demands of multicultural world. Brinda Bose states that

It is no doubt fitting that in the age of an extravagantly embracing of globalization, we may claim to have closed the gap between the straddling. Certainly, the legacy of postcolonial, today appears to have settled into a potentially numbing acceptance of bi-or multi-cultural euphoria. (132)

*The shadow lines* goes one step ahead of earlier partition novels. It not only interrogates the period 1947, but it goes beyond that and touches vividly 1963 – 64, the communal violence and riots. Moreover, it treats the question of the generation of nations and validity of the process and its results in a comprehensive manner. It turns to be a prototypical Indian English novel emerging out of, and addressing the issues of the contemporary milieu. However, the details are relevant for any other riots as well because every time, riots harm society equally and the difference transpires only in the death toll and phrasing of newspaper headlines. Using an unusual narrative technique, the writer reveals the gory details of the 1964 riots in bits and pieces –it is revealed through the narrator's own memory of his suffering, the newspaper reports, Robi's accounts and finally May's account. The narrator recalls the trouble in Calcutta had occurred after Tridib and the others had left for Dhaka. He remembers that the day was 10<sup>th</sup> January 1964, and connects it with the fact that, was the day when the first cricket test match of 1964 series had begun.

The contemporary man thrives on violence and lives amidst war, terrorism, riots and becomes a victim. In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh shows a glimpse of this world where violence and crude barbarity prevails. The time span of the novel extends from 1939 to 1979 with 1964 being a very important year for the characters. It converges on the traumatic life of a family in Calcutta and Dhaka in 1964 when a member of the family, Tridib was killed in a communal war.

Violence, or its threat, rising out of the communal rift is a common phenomenon in the subcontinent. The novel portrays violence in Calcutta, India and Dhaka, Bangladesh. The ideological and mystical strain apart, the novel shows at a very materialistically observable level, how an event that took place in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir gave rise to responses in Pakistan—both East and West – and thence originated a wave of violence that travelled across borders to reach India. The sacred relic of Muslims of the valley, Mu-I-Mubarak, was stolen from the Hazratbal mosque on 27 December 1963. There were riots against the government and the police in the valley, with no communal overtones to all. Yet black day was observed in Karachi on 31 December and ramblings of violence were distant but discernible there. The relic was recovered on 4 January 1964.

Chronologically, the story begins with a passage of time in colonial India when the narrator was not born. The year 1939 is historically significant for the outbreak of the Second World War the writer indirectly describes the cruelties of war. Mayadebi and her husband with their eight-year-old son, Tridib, had stayed with Mrs. Price, a family friend in London in 1939 for a whole year when the war had started. Tridib had told the narrator about their life at 44, Lymington Road and other places. People in London had started living with the terror of German air raids and Mrs. Price's brother, Alan and his three friends were killed in an attack. Tridib witnessed the coupling of casual strangers in a theatre and strikingly, that place was 'bombed out'."

In the second section of novel, 'coming home', Ghosh returns to the Indian subcontinent, to Calcutta and Dhaka. Deeply touched but its violence, Ghosh vividly describes the riots of 1964. Using the memory techniques, the novelist describes the events, riots in Calcutta that started on 10<sup>th</sup> January 1964. Surprisingly, the narrator then a school-going boy, was the only one at the bus stop and similarly that the school was nearly vacant because of a rumor circulated that the whole of Calcutta's water supply was poisoned. After the early

departure from the school, when the boys were returning by bus, a mob hurled stones at it and chased it from its normal route.

Mobs in Calcutta went rampaging through the city, killing Muslims, and burning and loot their houses. The police had to open fire on mobs and curfew was clamped on the city, the police could not bring the situation under control. Therefore army was called from Fort William. It took about a week to bring normalcy in the city. As Malgonker quotes in his book *A Bend in the Ganges*. “The entire land was being spattered by the blood of its citizens, blistered and disfigured with the fires of religious hatred: its roads were glutted with enough dead bodies to satisfy the ghouls of a major war” (22).

Ghosh has tried to stage his revelation about the aftermath of the evils of war and the lost identity of an individual tossed between both the natural disaster and artificial disaster which arises out of human selfish desires. Hence, violence is the heart of the novels that keeps the story vibrant throughout the intellectual journey. The novel is not a recapitulation of these historic upheavals. It catches alive the trauma of emotional rupture and choked human relations and life limiting to the earthly end or destruction which encompasses the sickle of death.

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