

# Incarnation of an 'in between space': Quest for the Elaborated Terrain of Cultural Hybridity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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## Abstract:

*The narrative of the nation along with its inherent politico-cultural discourse lingers with the issues like the performance of history, the cultural matrix of the mythical tradition, and the dominant national religious ideologies as authentic and convenient emotive symbols of demarcation. Among such symbols of demarcation, the political practice of the construction of border, stands as the dominant emotive symbol that with a view to reinvigorate the sense of nationalist pride entertains the discourse of division i.e. between the 'self' and the 'other'. Thus the constructed borders defending the politics of division eventually becomes geographical entities necessitating 'homogeneous community' as a mandatory practice in the way of achieving 'deep horizontal comradeship'. In this context, Amitav Ghosh's fictional reconstruct *The Shadow Lines* accommodates different geographical locales like war-devastated London, politically troubled post-partition East-Bengal and riot-hit Calcutta and attempts a major analysis of the emotional composition of the existing human individual that thrives on aggression. The novel seems to reverberate the feeling of whole South Asia with coherent suggestion of liberty and pangs of divisions. The metanarrative of the novel being formed by the emotive narratives of disparate characters from different geographical locale having various cultural and imaginative discourses relating the history of migration, issues of amnesia, notions of homogeneity of nationality as necessity of a nation and so forth attempts to bring to the fore the complex strategies of the cultural discourses and thereby makes a plea for the emergence of a domain of cultural harmony beyond the grid of discursive and emotive nationalist milieu.*

**Key words:** hybridity, cultural discourse, migration, religious ideologies, homogeneity,

[T]his year ... there was an extra festival on the calendar, a new myth to celebrate, because a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into, a world which, although it had five thousand years of history, although it had invented the game of chess and traded with Middle Kingdom Egypt, was nevertheless imaginary, into a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by effort of a phenomenal collective except in a dream we will all agreed to dream; it was a mass fantasy shared in varying degrees by Bengali and Punjabi, Madrasi and Jat, and would periodically need the sanctification and renewal which can only be provided by rituals of blood. India, the new myth- a collective fiction in which anything was possible, a fable rivalled

only by the two other mighty fantasies : money and God. (Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*)

The nation, as defined by Benedict Anderson as an "imagined political community", as a 'limited' imaginary construct stands with finite borders beyond which the discursive imagination situates the 'other'. Such imagined communities, as Anderson suggests are not to be distinguished by their genuineness or falsity but by the 'style' in which they are imagined. Thus the 'imagined political community' by default lingers with the issues of the projection of emotive desires on to a piece of territory making the entity i.e. 'nation' as a politico-cultural problematic subjected to narration. The notions of narration presupposes certain parameters for the imagination of the nation leading to the formation of national consciousness which again remains fundamentally premised upon the dichotomy of the 'self' and the 'other' , 'us' vs 'them'. This is precisely in this regard Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* stands as a relevant fictional reconstruct of the author the metanarrative of which unpacks the vainness of demarcation which in reality while differentiating nation from nation, separates humans miles apart. The novel depicts how the ritualistic practice of forming borders in formation of new nations which is a suitable way out for the administrators of achieving a definite selfhood or national identity, in reality gives birth to landscapes of chaos resulting in communal violence, unnecessary riots, rootlessness of human psyche, refugee complexes, and above all the destruction of human bond and brotherhood instead of solving the problem. In his essay 'The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi' the novelist talks about the apocalyptic vision of Indian socio-political scenario during 1984 caused by the separatist violence in Punjab, the military attack on the great Sikh Temple of Amritsar; the assassination of the Prime Minister , Mrs. Indira Gandhi , riots in several cities, the gas disaster in Bhopal that used to form the basic ingredients of Delhi newspapers and he himself in decisions about writing that asserts:

When I went back to my desk in the November of 1984, I found myself confronting decisions about writing that I had never faced before. How I was to write about that I had seen without reducing it to mere spectacle? My next novel was bound to be influenced by my experiences but I could see no way of writing directly about those events without re-creating them as a panorama of violence.

He further goes on to say that:

Within a few months, I started my novel, which I eventually called, "*The Shadow Lines*" – a book that led me backward in time, to earlier memories of riots, ones witnessed in childhood. It became a book not about any one event but about the meaning of such events and their effects on the individuals who live through them. ( Ghosh )

Written against the backdrop of the civil strife in the post partition East Pakistan and riot in Calcutta, the narrative begins in 1939, the year World War II broke out and ends in 1964 with the eruption of a cycle of violence in both India and East Pakistan. It spans three generations of the narrator's family spread over Calcutta, Dhaka, and his English family friends, the Prices. The narrative of Ghosh's fictional reconstruct depicts how the Tresawson family and Dutta Choudhuri family despite having the identities of coloniser and colonised ones carry on their cordial fluidity of harmonious relationship and thus becomes an ideal performative amidst such political chaos. The events revolve around Mayadebi's family, their friendship and sojourn with the English friends, the Prices and Tham'ma, the narrator's grandmother's links with Dhaka, her ancestral city. The *Shadow Lines* takes us into the mnemonic fund of the young narrator who as a wide-eyed adolescent worshipped his uncle, Tridib about whom he says, " Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and... eyes to see them with" . It is Tridib who fed him with the memories of his visit to London during the war; and Thamma, his grandmother who shared with him her nostalgia of East Bengal where she was born and spent childhood. And then, there is Ila, the daughter of Tridib's elder brother, who travels all over the world with her diplomat parents and occasionally comes home to tell a wonderstruck boy accounts of her experiences abroad.

The assertions of Ghosh himself indicate to the involvement of socio-politico-historical events in the construction of the imaginative discourses to form the narrative of the nation. And the construction of the 'other' in this context plays a vital role. Meenakshi Mukherjee asserts in her essay *Maps and Mirrors*:

The construction of the nation is a two way process, entailing on the one hand a broad homogenization despite seeming differences of what lies within the boundary and a projection of alienness upon what is situated outside ( Mukherjee 255 ).

In this novel Ghosh represents Tha'mma, a victim of dispersal, as a rootless leaf in the vortex of communal violence for whom history of violence is the suitable weapon for nation-building. Her fascination towards militant nationalism makes her suggest the narrator, 'you can't build a country ...without a strong body' (Ghosh 8). The destructive operations of nation-building provide her with the vision of a nation as a paradise built on the altar of sacrifice of humans and, therefore her narrative attempts to unify people through brutality and establishes them as the rightful member of one particular nation. For Tha'mma the people of England live there with their objectified right which they have inherited by blood and therefore for her, Ila doesn't have any right to live there. She expresses, 'she doesn't belong there. It took those people a long time to build that country...war is their religion. That's what it takes to make a country' (Ghosh 78). This accentuates

her sense of freedom and nation-building that claims to pay back blood for blood and, contempt for contempt. Therefore the nationalistic cry like 'Bharat Mata-ki-jai' 'Vande Mataram' could well match her revolutionary credo of going to any extent to be 'free'.

Her vision is constantly disturbed at the same time fascinated by the problematic ideas revolving around the identity of nationalist / terrorist dialectic. The violent cartography of her political community gets accentuated when she replies while being asked by the narrator regarding her guts in killing the English magistrate. The narrator sums up her expression:

I would have been frightened, she said. But I would have prayed for strength , and God willing, yes, I would have killed him. It was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free (Ghosh 39).

Such entrenched hostility of Tha'mma comes with the reinvention of the site of Hindu nationalism with its cumulative creation of the nationalist historiography and the rise of Hindu fundamentalism as a byproduct of what Anderson calls 'religious community'(Anderson 7). Her basic demand of 'freedom' itself becomes a problematic concept as she herself remains unable to pinpoint the point of colonisation whether a national or emotional issue which further embraces her without leaving a scope from getting rid of the stories of 'other(s)'. Under the spell of such split vision of rootedness her old address 1/31 Jindabaha Lane as a symbolic code of her residential status as an original inhabitant now becomes somehow an unsafe dungeon from where she is supposed to rescue 'Jathamoshoi' (Ghosh 135) only by 'bringing him to Calcutta' (Ghosh 150). Thus the grammar of nationalism punctuates her grammar of life for which the meaning of mere 'coming' and 'going' end up being mere sound images to refer to the 'verbs of movement.'

It is memory alone, the memory of Dhaka where she could hear the buzzing of flies and could see Kana-babu sitting behind his cashbox scratching his stomach and so forth that provides her with some unknown nostalgic joy. But the non-existence of her emotional imprints of her cultural and societal codes keeps Dhaka and its reality and Dhaka of Tha'mma's imagination torn apart. Therefore the existence of border between India and Dhaka, visible from the Airplane becomes a mandatory imaginative discourse for her. She asks:

But surely there's something-- trenches, or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other,...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 (Ghosh 151).

This search for the existence of the physical border between two nations is in a way a justification of the 'two nations' theory that M.K.Gandhi while writing about

several issues after the auspicious moment of the legitimised vision of free Bharat identifies in the *Harijan* as an 'untruth'.

Her utterance with this kind of hostile inclination towards partition gets its final blow when her uncle refuses to go back to Calcutta saying, :

I don't believe in 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? ... I was born here, and I'll die here (Ghosh 215).

Ila, being the daughter of a successful economist with the U.N. in connection of her father's supposedly intellectual job remains 'always away' in terms of her physical space from her placental roots, to her relations and emotional entanglement with her 'cultural consciousness' she originally belongs to (Ghosh 6). Her compulsory tour through 'somewhere in Africa or South-East Asia' makes her travel through the trajectory of different narratives as a mandatory process of the construction of her 'selfhood' making her own narrative an incomprehensible knot to herself (Ghosh 6). That is why after having visited a number of countries like Cairo, Addis Ababa, Brisbane, her own narrative begins borrowing the tinges of 'another' culture making herself an accumulation of identities without any definite narrative of her own. Her ambiguous and so-called occidental cosmopolitanism makes her forget her childhood memories of 'long time ago' and forms her cultural discourse that cling the photographic records of her occidental 'Yearbooks of International Schools' that sarcastically rejects even her very presence in the same frame with the 'most beautiful, the most talented, the most intelligent girls in the school' who happened to be her 'closest friends' (Ghosh 22).

Her inability of negotiation with the fluid of history keeps her stuck within the narrow domain of political community that accommodates her with a fanciful presence of 'Magda...a huge doll almost as big as Ila, with pink cheeks and snow-white arms, bright gold hair, and blue eyes' or a boyfriend like Nick in her life as mere symbols of her wish-fulfilment (Ghosh 71).

Tridib's archeological knowledge not merely in the mode of institutional education but as one of the tools of successive application of diplomacy being achieved through his consecutive travelling through narratives of others in a way problematizes the discursive practise of nationalist representation. Tridib in Bhabha's term is that 'self' within the 'other' who, through his supposedly otherwise activities and harmonious attitude towards human individuals establishes an anti-discursive narrative of nation that exposes the possibility at the core of border life. Tridib's narrative of the nation with his effortless ease exposes the desire to go, 'beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and other places and even, if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself

and one's image in the mirror' (Ghosh 29).

This 'beyond' asserts Bhabha in his *The Location of Culture*:

Is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past...we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, outside and inside, inclusion and exclusion (Bhabha 1).

Tridib denies the binary opposition of 'us' and 'them'. His very unselfish martyr-like death is the emblematic of that non-violent means to prevent and at the same time an active protest against the doctrine of division. He is not a 'sovereign' subject but is an ambivalent performative who remains perpetually in motion, pursuing errant and unpredictable routes, open to change and re-inscription. As an owner of such train of flexible reconstruct Tridib's imaginary functioning necessitates his own reconstruction as a subject to meet May in the form of a man 'without a country' who 'fell in love with a woman across-the-seas' without any code of nationalist identity. His emotional longing denying all socio-political viability with his dialogic imagination further wants to meet 'May as a stranger, in a ruin'. Tridib crosses the shackles of all culture to create a new one, a culture that is inclusive for all possibilities.

Tridib's martyr like death in Jindabahal lane where he went to rescue granduncle is not a mere rescue operation as the successor of a diplomat but is an abdication of the individual whose personal loss of life proves to be advantageous for the interest of humanity. And his death weaves a new narrative of nation, flavoured with 'a final redemptive mystery' (Ghosh 252) that stands without a border where says Tagore in *Nationalism*, 'defeat may lead him to victory, death to immortality, and where in the contemplation of Eternal Justice those who are the last may yet have their insult transmuted into a golden triumph' (Tagore 13).

Therefore Tridib in Tagore's words full of 'moral ideals' to establish 'maitri' in this world occupied by the struggles of political right and obsessive might (Tagore 18).

In contrast to such healthy imaginative discourse, the ritualistic practice of forming borders in the formation of new nations as a means of achieving what Benedict Anderson says a 'Horizontal comradeship' itself construct 'looking glasses' where all the shameless and animalistic activities of othering get reflected. Thus two so-called dissimilar nations become alike through this kind of militant activities. The narrator records :

In Calcutta had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka, a moment each city was the inverted image of the other, locked in an irreversible symmetry by the line that set us free-our looking glass border (Ghosh 223).

Thus the borders become shadowy and further the 'Bartholomew Atlas' as a performative tool of the pedagogical discourse of nationhood announces its identity as the ship towards a place where as Bhabha says, 'Two realms flow unceasingly and uncertainly into each other like waves in the never-ending stream of life-process itself' (Bhabha 2).

Thus it transcends all imaginary borders of time and space and creates a new domain where figures like Tridib or Saifuddin by their very activities problematize any essentialist or fundamentalist notion of nationhood by keeping the warmth of human bond in flow. This note of humanism is an incarnation of the 'inbetween' space that in Bhabha's words 'provide the terrain of elaborating strategies of selfhood –singular or communal-that initiate new identity'. The metanarrative of the novel indicates a search for a location of culture that only comes through the 'Purgatory' of the inhabitants of (Ghosh 22) an 'imagined community', the shadow lines of which is decorated not with the 'Petals of Blood'[NgugiwaThiong'o] but with 'Red Oleanders' [Tagore] where 'simple task' of uniting memory and people of the whole world is not 'difficult' any more. There neither one 'divides' 'memory' nor does the greed for an essentialist nation puts an innocent life to an end. Rather it is the force of human sympathy, of neighbourliness, of fellowship and love, that constructs a nation worth living for humanity. Tagore sums up in *Nationalism*:

Now the time has come when we must make the world problem our own problem; we must bring the spirit of civilisation into harmony with the pride, still keep ourselves fast within shell of the seed and the crust of the earth which protected and nourished our ideals; for these, the shell and the crust, were meant to be broken, so that life may spring up in all its vigour and beauty, bringing its offerings to the world in open light (Tagore 14).

Ghosh's novel opens our horizon precisely to such possibilities.

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