

Vol 4 Issue 8 Feb 2015

ISSN No :2231-5063

## International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

# Golden Research Thoughts

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**RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595**

**ISSN No.2231-5063**

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## MANIFESTATIONS OF CONFLICT AND ETERNAL QUEST FOR FREEDOM IN AMITAV GHOSH'S THE SHADOW LINES-A GLANCE

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**Abstract:-**The fiction of the eighties often presents the rare picture of strife of the contrastive tension between form and what is formed. In this struggle, often the content seems to overtake the conventional form and its narrative structures. A strong urge to overcome the barriers of established narrative styles and apparent interest in experimentation as also a search for new themes and variations on old themes can be noticed in many writers of this period. In the words of Ira Pande, "their narratives, their characters and their language are pan of a pattern that emerges whenever a social order changes, when suppressed voices find utterance and a new world opens" (Pande .381).

**Keywords:**Manifestations of Conflict and Eternal Quest for Freedom

### INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh's Novel **The Shadow Lines** deals, among other things, with the social relations of the different arms of a Bengali bhadralok family, the Dana-Chaudhuris displaced from one part, Dhaka., of pre-partition Bengal to another part of it, Calcutta, by the partition. The novel is involved in the particularities of specific cultural locations. Even though in the post-colonial era many would like to think that the nation is a fiction whose boundaries are capable of being re-imagined and redrawn, it nevertheless remains a powerful determining presence.

Owing to the religious barriers that divide Bengali society as two nations, travel to London is far easier': ban the one beyond "the looking-glass border" (**The Shadow Lines** 228) between Dhaka and Calcutta. The question of belonging and identity gets curiously displaced. "The novel highlight: the postcolonial trauma of the impossibility of going home to a place that has been defined as foreign (Sujala Singh 16). The narrator's grandmother, while going to her ancestral home in Dhaka, is forced to fill in Dhaka as her place of birth on the immigration form, "and at the moment she had not been able to quite understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality" (**The Shadow Lines**, 152).

Ghosh brings into sharp focus the socio-cultural differences imposed on the same community divided by political borders. Travelling to Dhaka, according to Tha'mma, was different in the pre-partition days, because she could "come home to Dhaka whenever she wanted" (**The Shadow Lines**, 152). But she realizes that, post-partition, for immigrants like her to come home is to arrive in a foreign country. Thamma's search for the pre-Partition Dhaka of her childhood and youth is projected as a nostalgic return home. Despite her naturalization as an Indian citizen, her strong loyalties and affiliations to the city of her birth, which surface during this return, permit Ghosh to investigate the conflicting claims of cultural roots and belonging, nations and boundaries in the Indian mind. The irony of her alienation in her own homeland comes home to her only through Tridib's teasing reminder, "but you are a foreigner now, you are as foreign here as May"(**The Shadow Lines** 195). The two sections of the novel titled "Going Away" and "Coming Home" aptly sum up "the postcolonial condition where, especially for the immigrants, going away and coming home challenge the essentialist notions of belonging and identity" (Roy 40). The complications of cultural

identity with religious overtones result in the communal riot that claims the life of Tridib, the central figure, who tells the nameless narrator that all communal divisions are meaningless since they are made to suit the selfish convenience of some so-called leaders. Cutting across the man-made and irrelevant geographical boundaries "Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with" (**The Shadow Lines 20**). Communal divides are stories that create invisible borderlines and enslave the minds of men. **The Shadow Lines** is a novel filled with the specificities of names, dates and places, "a novel in love with some kinds of cultural difference even while it seeks to imagine a way beyond others" (Mee36). The two different narratives of the novel, namely, the self and the society, collide with devastating effects. The communal barrier between India and Pakistan does not recognize the common heritage of Bengali society and the divide gets deepened by the religious conflict between the two nations "locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free -our looking-glass border" (**The Shadow Lines 233**). The metaphor, the figure of the mirror, runs throughout the novel as the sign of relations which, paradoxically, connect nations, societies and individuals even as they divide them.

The homogeneity of the Indian society is at best a myth as vouchsafed by the innumerable socio-cultural conflicts described in the novels. Indian culture seems to be constructed around the proliferation of differences. Ghosh, in his writings, "is at pains to foreground the cultural syncretism of the Indian sub-continent in strategic opposition to the historicism of nationalistic discourse" (N.Srivastava 59). An analysis of the communal conflicts presented in **The Shadow Lines** leads to the conclusion that they are case studies "in the hysteria of the subcontinent" (226). The narrative of **The Shadow Lines** moves among shifting temporal and spatial planes so that the narrative time coincides with the consciousness of the narrator who wants to capture the reality of communal fights and break the myth of communal cohesion and nationhood. A parallel attempt to reconstruct history by eschewing the received official interpretation of events is accomplished throughout. The attempt is to uncover the truth of socio-cultural and religious conflicts in India and its neighbourhood. "Heteroglossia - the different discourses and tongues contained within the normative framework of the novelistic language - is shown to be emblematic of the civilisational system of social, religious, linguistic differences that constitutes" (Srivastava 68).

The socio-cultural conflicts, in the Indian context, sometimes take on a religious colour. The grandma is shocked to find that her uncle, living in Dhaka, is sharing a house with Muslim, and eating the meals cooked by a Muslim woman, Khalil's wife. The religious conflicts that cut at the roots of socio-cultural amity in a pluralistic society are of deep concern for Amitav Ghosh as exemplified several times in this novel. The Calcutta riots of 1964 in the wake of the loss of the sacred hair of Prophet Mohammed from the Hazratbal Shrine in Srinagar, described in the novel, prove this point once again. **The Shadow Lines** "is a manifestation of the desire to validate the postcolonial experience and to attempt a reconstruction of 'public history' through a reconstruction of the 'private' or personal history" (Bagchi 187). The cultural interface between India and the West is illustrated in the episode involving Ila and Robi and the narrator at a Calcutta night club. There, much against Robi's wishes, Ila asks a stranger to dance with her. At that point, Robi interferes and makes them all leave the night club. His explanation is simply that women can't do that in India. So Ila runs off, crying, saying that all she wants is to the "free of your bloody culture and free of all of you" (89). The Westernized Ila virtually becomes the narrator's antithesis with the cultural divide deepening steadily: "She seemed immeasurably distant then, in her serene confidence in the centrality and eloquence of her experience, in her quiet pity for the pettiness of lives like mine, lived out in the silence of voiceless events in a backward world" (**The Shadow Lines 104**). This East-West disharmony is reinforced during the narrator's visit to London when she mocks his reaction to the Underground as he "gulped in the netherworld smell of electricity and dampness and stale deodorant" with "For God's sake stop carrying on like a Third World tapioca farmer - it's just the bloody Underground" (**The Shadow Lines, 21**).

The socio-cultural differences between the narrator and Ila reach a point of explosion when Ila slights the narrator with more than contempt: "You wouldn't understand the exhilaration of events like that - nothing really important ever happens where you are[. . .]well of course there are famines and riots and disasters (**The Shadow Lines 12**) but those are local things after all - not like revolutions or anti-fascist wars, nothing that sets a political example to the world, nothing that is really remembered" (104). The histories of colonialism and racism haunt relationships between the Datta- Chaudhuris and the Prices, English friends-of-the family across **two** generations. When the narrator enthusiastically displays the huge, expensive table that Tridib's grandfather had bought from a Crystal Palace exhibition in the 1890s, May Price exclaims her outrage at this sign of colonial collusion and class politics: "Why did he bring this back, for God's sake?" she cried. "Why this worthless bit of England; why something so utterly useless?" (**The Shadow Lines, 48**). Her politically correct exclamation clashes with and undermines the narrator's romantic vision of cultural heritage. The colonial mental frame of the narrator is contrasted with the postcolonial attitudes of May.

In Ghosh's construction of the narrative of **The Shadow Lines**, the enforced silences in the text are important in inducing the sense of spatial-temporal cohesion of an imagined community, which is struggling to annihilate any cohesion on the lines of communal dichotomy. According to Suvir Kaul, the silences that the narrator uncovers are "not contingent or accidental, but are constitutive of the nature of Indian modernity" (Kaul 209). The correlation between communal identities and nationalisms in the Indian subcontinent indicates the centrality in Ghosh's text of the silences that form the kernel of a crumbling conception of nationhood with cultural and

communal subtexts. A striking example of the silence appears when the narrator recounts his experience of "trouble" between Hindus and Muslims as a young schoolboy in Calcutta. He writes of his relief that his best friend Montu who was Muslim wasn't on the bus that day. His absence, however, unleashed the rituals of cleansing by the other boys - the emptying out of water bottles poisoned by the rumour of contamination - "they had poured poison into Tala tank... the whole of Calcutta's water supply was poisoned" ( **The Shadow Lines**, 195). Unsuspected, unnamed, yet the identity of who 'they' are is tacitly understood the sense of belonging that is shared by a busload of young school children, the quiet, unsaid communal consensus, the divide between 'us' and 'them' which needs no words, emerges in the narrative. The title of the novel **The Shadow Lines**, is symbolic of barriers and partitions, all man-made, delicately unreal but dangerously real. Individuals stand divided, as do families and nations. Tridib who had med to teach the narrator "to use his imagination with precision" meets his death because of the violence of nationalism with socio cultural conflicts implied, ironically enough, when he tries to guard his friend an English girl, from blind Hindu-Muslim hatred. "Ghosh subtly suggests that shadow lines divide, tear, embitter human beings; this artistically leads to the sudden revelation or Joycean epiphzmy experienced by the narrator towards the end of the novel" ( **The Shadow Lines** 45).

Amitav Ghosh's **The Shadow Lines** gets focused on conflicts of the political kind too. At the end of the freedom struggle the political conflicts between the Congress Party and the Muslim League reach a point of no return, and Partition follows. Thamma who belongs to Dhaka which is now part of Pakistan (Bangladesh) thinks about the aftermath of the struggle for power and the division of the nation: "Trenches perhaps, or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land" ( **The Shadow Lines**, 151), indicating the physical borders between the two countries. Challenging and disproving the doctored documents of India's history and politics, Ghosh breaks through many barriers of conventionality: "With its axis on the Indian subcontinent's specified context the novel's breathtaking compass coils together geographical distances and deliberately attempts to break many myths while taking the country's history, culture and political situation in its stride" (D.Rao 81). Questioning the very ideas of nationhood and nationalism, Ghosh seems to hope for the end of political conflicts because the nationalistic spirit is the main evil behind splits and bifurcations of people for fulfilling the ulterior motives of the power mongering politicians of the day. "The Shadow Lines obviously questions the idea of nationhood that is consolidated through the baptism of wars or coercive apparatus" (Mukherjee 265). Leaving aside many other issues, Ghosh analyses novelistically the problems that colonialism throws up - the way the invisible chains have a deeper grip on the mind of a nation than the visible chains." (14) He turns away from the novel of Empire with its ambivalent: towards colonialism in the tradition of Kipling and Forster" (Sujala Singh 22). Tridib hints at possibilities of community formation on the basis of post-nationalist cosmopolitanism .which seems to be the only lasting remedy for political conflicts emerging from nationalist and religious tendencies. His favourite story is that of "a man without a country who fell in love with woman across-the-seas"(186), which is re-enacted in his own encounter with May. "Tridib is cast as the paradigmatic figure of migrancy and hybridity, hinting at imaginings of the self other than the traditional ones" (Roy 41). Ghosh foregrounds the most violent phase of Indian nationalism against genteel domesticity, and engages with the silences and amnesia of the dominant patriarchal nationalism which tries to cover up many gory and blood-stained chapters of political conflicts.

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