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Quest for Identity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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ABSTRACT

The present study, deals with human beings caught between certain lines and national boundaries which are just shadowy and imaginary. The main concept of Quest for Identity is portrayed in the select novel of *The Shadow Lines* by Indian writer Amitav Ghosh. The novel comes under the preview of the politics of refugee, rehabilitation and resettlement. It raises the questions of nation, national boundaries and national identity, issues of displacement, migration, hybridity and ethnicity.

The paper analyses the multicultural conflicts as portrayed in the novel; the lines that bring people together and hold them apart; lines that are visible from one perspective and non-existent from another. The study is an attempt to reveal the search for national identity, the need for independence, the difficult relationship with colonial culture. It is a continuous narrative which replicates the pattern of violence not only of that certain period but also of twenty first century people in India.

Keywords: Otherness, issues of displacement and National identity.

INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh is a Bengali Indian author, a pioneer of English literature in India, best known for his works in the English language. Amitav Ghosh occupies a rather curious place in the landscape of contemporary English language authors from the Indian subcontinent. Freedom from political colonialism came as a refreshing wind to write and discuss historical nationalist issues such as diaspora, migration, social and cultural issues like east-west encounter, otherness, and class system.

National identity: The idea of the 'nation' has been largely a western concept, a term appointed in the recent history of human civilizations and international affairs to address diverse aspects of human communities,

sometimes social but more often political. The primary meaning of 'nation' and the one most frequently ventilated in literature was political and equated 'the people' and the state. In the novel of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, is a search for national identity of the major characters.

The Shadow Lines can be viewed at one level as the story of a Bengali family through whom Ghosh, discusses and analyses many issues of contemporary India. The characters span three generations and their story corresponds to the growth of Calcutta as a city and India as a nation.

The title *The Shadow Lines* is evocative. One of the major concerns of the novel is the creation of India and Pakistan and the subsequent impact of the

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partition. The old united Bengal was divided into two and for sustaining the separation, differences, had to be invented. The novel has two sub-sections: "Going Away" and "Coming Home", which gives a queer sense of home and homelessness.

Home in *The Shadow Lines* has an allegorical relationship with nation. Tha'mma, the narrator's grandmother the character who had to move from Dhaka to India as a refugee, tells the story of her house in Dhaka which was divided between two families as a result of a dispute. The division of the house was such that an actual line was drawn through the middle, dividing everything including the commode. The fact was that the division was irrational and totally unnecessary. Once the house was divided the other side became totally inaccessible.

Everyone in the novel, in fact hovers over the shadow lines between imagination and reality; everyone has his or her stories and memories that are based partly on imagination, and reality and when they are retold they are relived as well. Similarly, when the character Ila teaches her cousin to play houses with her in the dark basement of the family house in the village, she talks about Nick Price, with whom she has evidently played this game before and whom she describes as coming to her rescue when she is attacked by a group of racist children in London. It is only later that the adult narrator learns what the reality was. Nick was ashamed of her and certainly not willing to help her. Ila is obviously in love with Nick, and she tricks him into marrying her, with her father's money as bait; but she soon discovers that Nick does not care for her and he is openly unfaithful.

In fact, some pain is part of every stage of life. Ila's pain is that Nick ignores her. No one's situation is perfect and that is life. Some pages beautifully fill us with childhood joys. (TSL 46)

Imagination is not just a part of reality, and does create its own reality. Rumour can start a riot; so that the story of the loss of the Prophet's hair in faraway Srinagar can kill Indian Hindus in Dhaka and make vast crowds of people believe that their water supply has been poisoned and break up a friendship in Calcutta. For it is imagination that links people together, not the fact of geographical continuity.

The riots in these two cities of Bengal have 'dropped out of memory into the creator of a volcano of silence' (TSL 230) because neither the newspaper nor the reader was at the time or later imaginatively involved with what had happened then.

This idea of reality is suited to a mass society whose eyes and ears are daily assailed with innumerable aspects of the world so that the imagination is clogged, instead of being inspired. The idea of society and social structures is beginning to disappear under an increasing flood of social facts, always being revised, which are represented as instances. (TSL 147)

Reality is as subjective as the imagination; facts are not, and so cannot be as true as imaginatively comprehended experience. Dhaka itself no longer seems the same Dhaka, but it is only when Tha'mma and her sister see their old house that reality overtakes memory and imagination. The house is changed beyond recognition, but the uncle has not. He clings to the only reality he knows the old family and refuses to go with them:

Once you start moving you never stop... It will never stop, 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. (TSL 215)

As such, Ghosh's novel is less about the wishing away of troublesome political realities such as national dividing lines into "Shadows" or "illusions", as some critics have argued, than about the need to formulate a new, more fluid, framework for national identity formation. One interrogates the way in which differences are currently being polarized, set off against one another, in order to achieve the false unities of nationalism.

The Shadow Lines posits that maps create borderlines that define and enforce geographical and ideological limits on humanity. Ghosh was also personally affected by migration. He grew up in Dhaka, Calcutta, Baghdad and other places where his father's Foreign Service job took him; his family had roots in East Bengal and had spent many years in Burma. Ghosh, in one of the interviews with Michelle Caswell admits to this fact:

My own family was from Bengal; a large part of my family went to Burma, and others went to other parts of Indian subcontinent, and the more I've been thinking about my family over the last years, the more I realize that this is a very common condition. I am sure that in our family there are lots of people who have spread all over the world. I feel that it's important to find a way to write about this experience, where people are dispersed and spread out. (Caswell 107)

This novel tempts us to interpret the text as national allegory, an allegory for the British handling of India. But beyond individual connections there is a connotation that the novel as a whole constitutes the nation. It is also where human bond develops with constant interaction among the settlers. In other words, according to Gellner, Nationalism is decided on the basis of a few lines or boundaries that supposedly separate nations, both ethnically and politically. Ghosh renames these boundaries as *The Shadow Lines*, that do not demarcate or divide clearly. It is a continuous narrative which replicates the pattern of violence not only of that certain period but also of the twenty first century.

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