

THE PRESENTATION OF BORDERS AND BOUNDARIES IN *THE SHADOW LINES*

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Amitav Ghosh is arguably one of the most significant contemporary Indian English writers. He is a writer who travels and re-maps the world, drawing connections across the boundaries of modern nation-states. It is in this erasure and redrawing of cultural and political lines that divide and unite that the special quality of Amitav Ghosh's novels lies. Almost all his works, fictional or non-fictional, examine the role of borders and boundaries. G.J.V. Prasad aptly remarks:

Ghosh weaves together a pluralistic [sic] and self reflexive view of the world – one that challenges the smugness of accepted narratives and points of view and the certainties of postcolonial borders and well as generic boundaries. (56)

Ghosh's own experiences in life have perhaps predisposed him to this theme. "*The Shadow Lines*, is about the theme of borders and nationalism" (Anu Chopra 61). This novel is the result of the narrator's recollected memory. The story opens in that part of India where the narrator lives with his grandmother Tha'mma, father, mother and uncle Tridib. At places the story runs parallel in England where the narrator's grandmother's sister Mayadabi, her son Jatin, her daughter in law Queen Victoria and her grand daughter Ila live along with Mrs. Price's family. It seems that the story of the novel is woven around two families: Datta-Chaudhuris of Bengal and the Prices of London. The relationship of these families spans three generations. Through their relationships Ghosh wants to convey the message of crossing borders.

In *The Shadow Lines* Ghosh has clearly depicted geographical borders. In this novel, borders exist between three continents Europe, Asia and Africa; also border between three countries - India, East Pakistan and England. Indira Nityanadam notes, "The shadow Lines swings through continents – Europe, Asia and Africa and moves three countries—India, East—Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and England" (48). By the constant travelling Ghosh shows his idea of crossing borders. Tresawson comes from a village Mabe in Southern Cornwall to work as an overseer in a mine in Malaysia. From South East Asia he goes to Fiji, an island in the Mid Pacific. Then he turns to Bolivia and later he comes to Ceylon in the South East. Then he goes to Calcutta. Chaudaris also travel to Dhaka, Calcutta, Kashmir, London, and so on. Jatin is an Economist with the UN. Hence he is transferred from one country to another, and his daughter Ila and wife also travel

with him. Tha'mma, Tridib, May, and the narrator also cross over borders between two countries.

The story of the novel opens in India; the centre of the novel's story is in Dhaka, during the period before the Independence or partition. At the time of Independence, India had been divided into two parts India and Pakistan. The importance of border is so pressing that a country is divided in two parts by drawing an imaginary line. The whole story moves through the three cities mainly Dhaka, Calcutta and London, framed between the boundaries of three cities.

The novel under consideration is a record of borders and boundaries between cultures, and religions. Every religious community has certain boundaries within itself. When these boundaries are overemphasized, they turn to borders and the borders or the gaps result in communal disharmony and finally result in violence and riots- even great massacres. This novel depicts wide gaps or borders present between Hindu and Muslim communities. But the novelist revealed that the communal struggle is a result of political interest. Politics creates a disharmonious atmosphere in the name of liberty and freedom. It turns to a kind of misunderstanding which leads to a serious crisis within the communities. Novy Kapadia truly remarks, "*The Shadow Lines* aptly reveals that the cultural divide, communal struggle and misunderstanding is in a state of crisis in India" (90). An incident of misunderstanding between the majority and minority communalism is the hallmark of the novel. Mu-i-Mubarak a sacred relic, which was believed to be the hair of Prophet Mohammad himself, was displaced from its original place in Hazratbal Mosque on 27 December, 1963. Pakistan's religious authorities declared that the, "... theft of the relic was an attack on the identity of Muslims" (226). The Mu-i-Mubarak was 'recovered' by the officials of Central Bureau of Intelligence on 4 January 1964. This incident resulted in communal riots both in India and in Pakistan. The mob violence in Dhaka led to Tridib's death.

The narrator of the novel remembers his school days when a similar riot took place in Calcutta. There is rumour that 'they' have mixed poison in Tala Tank from where the water is supplied to entire Calcutta. Young minds believed that it was 'they', the Muslims, who had poisoned the water. The narrator disowns his best friend a young Muslim boy, named Montu, "... I lied, I haven't met Montu for months" (20). Here Ghosh is of the view that rumour increases the atmosphere of suspicion and distrust between the two communities.

Ghosh also brings out the atmosphere where the community crosses the borders to establish a peaceful environment in society, in nation and in world at large. In the novel the novelist describes the way Hindu Muslims helped each other:

The University communities of both Dhaka and Calcutta took the initiative in doing relief work and organising peace marches and newspapers on both sides of the border did some fine, humane pieces of reporting. As always there were innumerable cases of Muslims in East Pakistan giving shelter to Hindus, often

at the cost of their own lives, and equally, in India, of Hindus sheltering Muslims. (239-30)

Every community is dependent on other community. Without this interrelationship between two communities, one can not survive. This is evident through the character of Tha'mma and Jethamoshai. Tha'mma hated Montu (Mansur) narrator's friend, because he was a Muslim but at the end she takes the help of Khalil a Muslim rickshaw-puller to bring Jethamoshai to India. The same case is with Jethamoshai, who hated Muslims so much, "There was a time when that old man was so orthodox that he wouldn't let a Muslim's shadow pass within ten feet of his food" (210). But it is the irony of fate that after all these events he is looked after by the Khalil a Muslim. This incident reveals that with the course of time preoccupied notions of border and boundary dissolve away.

In the novel Ghosh portrays the border between the two races. Ila and narrator suffered due to this racial border. Ila suffers more, as she is brought up in a foreign land. She narrates her sufferings to the narrator through the symbol of her doll's name Magda. The striking fact is that there is something like a border and boundary in Ila's mind that differentiate her from other children in London as she compares herself with her doll Magda:

... they'd never seen anyone as beautiful as Magda. They had never seen hair that shone like hers – like a bright, golden light. They had never seen such deep blue eyes, nor cheeks as pink and healthy and smiling as hers. (73)

The above lines indicate how much she suffered as a result of racism. "This scenario is dictated by Ila's life abroad, in particular by her need to compensate for her experience of racism in England" (Suvir Kaul 272).

Ila's teacher Mrs. Tolland also treated her as a foreigner. Once in a class when Mrs. Tolland asked Denise to write a sentence on the blackboard, she wrote a wrong sentence whereas when Mrs. Tolland asked Ila to write the sentence she wrote it correctly. Then Mrs. Tolland said to Denise, "Well, Denise, perhaps you ought to take English lessons from *her*, even though it's your own language, not *hers*" [emphasis added] (74). It is noteworthy that a kind of border- complex seems to be working in Mrs. Tolland's mind which makes her differentiate between her students. Ila also suffered from the problem of racism as Nick neglected her. "Nick Price was ashamed to be seen by his friends, walking home with an Indian" (76). In spite of so many difficulties and suffering she crosses the boundary and succeeds in making Nick her husband. But her sufferings do not end with marriage as Nick indulged in extra-marital sexual activities.

Through a close reading of the novel one can come across the cultural boundaries prevalent in people's mind. The narrator, Ila and Robi go for drinking in the night club of the Calcutta Grand Hotel. There Ila wants to dance; the two men refuse to dance with her. When she gets up to ask a stranger, a businessman, to dance with her, Robi restrains her and pushes the businessman away. Robi is constrained by his Indian culture which does not allow girls to dance with strangers. Robi says, "Girls don't behave like that here" (88), and then, "you can

do what you like in England But here there are certain things you can not do. That's our culture; that's how we live" (88). As she runs away from them, her protest and her consequent words to narrator, confirms this theme of cultural distinctions, "Do you see now why I've chosen to live in London? Do you see? It's only because I want to be free... Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you" (88-89).

Ghosh in this novel not only presents the geographical and cultural boundary, but also border and boundary within the house itself. When Tha'mma's grandfather died the ancestral house was partitioned because of the conflict between her father and her uncle, Jethamoshai. A border drawn minutely as the partition of the house has been described in this way:

Soon things came to such a pass that they decided to divide the house with a wooden partition wall: there was no other alternative. But the building of wall proved to be far from easy because the two brothers insisting on their rights with a lawyer like precision, demanded that the division be exact down to the minutest detail. (123)

They build a wall so peculiar that "gone through a lavatory bisecting an old commode" (123). The brothers even divided the father's old nameplate. However this partition also symbolizes the partition of Bengal in to India and East Pakistan in 1947:

... Partition of the homeland the newly – drawn lines on the map of Bengal literally ran through homes, dividing them between the two nations, and houses on the border frequently had their bathroom in one country and their kitchen in another. (Barat, *Crossing Borders* 106)

Tha'mma and her sister Mayadebi have grown up with the outrages in family. The impact was more on Tha'mma as compared to Mayadebi, as she was very afraid of conflict between two brothers that's why she gave birth to only one child, who is the narrator's father. "As for herself, having learnt the meaning of brotherhood very early, she had not dared to take the risk of providing my father with one" (123). But during the last stage of her life she decided to bring Jethamoshai to Calcutta from Dhaka, as she heard that Jethamoshai was still alive. Tha'mma was very eager to bring Jethamoshai. Through this eagerness Ghosh wants to show the reconciliation in that particular family. Indeed, the aim of Ghosh through this incident is to provide the nation crossing border. Tha'mma wants to cross the border and is very eager to break that wall which was built by her father and Jethamoshai. She wants to reunite the family. It is evident that when the illusion of imagination breaks, there exist no borders, boundaries or walls that separate the family.

The border between outsider and insider, between belonging and not belonging is a more striking one. An outsider suffers from identity crisis, as he is not able to establish his/her identity in an alien land. Tha'mma though living in Calcutta always remembers Dhaka, her birth place. She also remembers every minute detail about Dhaka and their life there. One day she comes to know that her cousin, one of Jethamoshai's sons is living in Calcutta. She also came to know through the cousin's wife that the ninety year old Jethamoshai is still living in

their ancestral house in Dhaka. The house is now occupied by Muslim refugees from India and that old man is being taken care of by one such family. So Tha'mma thought that she would bring back Jethamoshai to Calcutta.

Tha'mma does not realize that Dhaka is no longer the place she had known earlier. When she was leaving for Dhaka, she had to fill a form. In the form to be filled, she realizes that the place of birth will be Dhaka but her nationality would be filled in as an Indian. This troubled her, "... because she liked things to be neat and in place... 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"(152). An insider feels like an outsider, a foreigner, because the border drawn between two countries make them India and East Pakistan. Tha'mma is no more a native, but a 'foreigner' as Tridib teases her, "you're as foreign here as May, much more than May for look at her, she doesn't even need a visa to come here" (195). The feeling of being an outsider is reiterated again and again as she finds, "But this is for foreigners; where's Dhaka?" (195). Her memory of the city vanishes away, and she herself feels like an outsider, "Yes, I really am a foreigner here – as foreign as May in Indian or Tagore in Argentina.... But whatever you may say, this isn't Dhaka" (195).

Ila's character as an outsider is an interesting one, as she belongs to the new generation who believe in liberty and freedom. Due to her constant travelling, Ila could never belong to any palace. She is never an insider in India; she fails to become an insider even in her country of adoption. Ila represents the vast majority of the Indian youth who are contemptuous about their own culture. They are not trying to set things right although they want to escape from their indigenous roots. Ila also belongs to this majority; she thinks that in London she is free to do anything, "Do you see now why I've chosen to live in London? Do you see? It's only because I want to be free" (88). By marrying Nick she wants to become an insider in England, but it never really happens. Ila discovers that, "... the squalor of the genteel little lives she had so much despised was part too of the free world she had tried to build for herself" (188).

Jethamoshai has never felt like an outsider in Dhaka because he never thought that he is an outsider there. After the partition, in spite of so much communal tension, he decides to make Dhaka his home. His children left him alone though he was happy in Dhaka, "... there was a family living there who looked after him and that was enough as far as he was concerned" (135). To him Dhaka was home and remained home. Tha'mma says, "...poor old man.... Imagine what it must be like to die in another country, abandoned and alone in your old age" (135). So she wants to take him to Calcutta but he refuses. For him Calcutta is now as much a 'foreign' city as Dhaka for Tha'mma. Jethamoshai says:

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? (215)

Tridib swings around the feeling of outsider – insider, though he has not travelled much. He also does not resemble his other family members; he stands apart from all them. He accepts every place as home and hence even on that fateful trip to Dhaka he did not feel an outsider

and went amidst the violent mob. When May moved out of the car to save Jethamoshai and Khalil, Tridib also follows her. In that flame of violence May is saved but the other three "... were all dead. They had cut Khalil's stomach open. The old man's head had been hacked off. And they had cut Tridib's throat from ear to ear" (251). Tridib is a man whom no one takes seriously in the family, so he never feels that he is an insider. Tridib prefers to travel in imagination. Ironically he is killed.

By this outsider – insider paradigm Ghosh raises the question of whether borders are marked to keep insiders in or outsiders out. As Indira Nityananadam aptly remarks:

The shadow lines that mark borders, that divide people into native and foreign and insiders and outsiders are not merely a physical reality for Ghosh. These lines go far deeper into our psyche and are hence more long-lasting and formidable. (54)

When the person is able to cross these borders, or on crossing these borders he can develop integrated relationships. If s/he fails to do so then s/he remains an 'outsider'.

Ghosh succeeded in depicting the hollowness and futility of borders and boundaries through the characters of Tridib, May, narrator and Ila. Here Ghosh wants to say that there is nothing like border or line which separates countries, cities. It is entirely the invention of one's mind. Once Tridib says to the narrator:

He said to me once that one could never know any thing except through desire... that carried one beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and places and even, if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and over image in the mirror. (29)

Through Tridib the novelist reveals his belief to live in a place without any border, without any limitation. When Tha'mma was leaving for Dhaka she worried about the border for whether she would be able to see the border between India and Pakistan from the plane then her son told her that, "... did she really think the border was a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other like it was in a school atlas, she was not so much offered as puzzled" (151). Here Ghosh is of the view that borders are not physical lines. They are the creations of one's mind that separate or divide the countries, culture, language, class, and people.

The narrator is also convinced regarding the futility of borders. But he is also of the view that it is the border that brought them closer, for without experiencing separation one can not know the joy of reunion and reconciliation:

... Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines-so closely that I, in Calcutta, had only to look in to the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other, locked in to an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free from our looking glass border. (233)

Urbashi Barat is also of the same view that borders are responsible for bringing the two Bengals close. Her words merit citation, "... the physical fact of geographical boundaries between the two Bengals has in fact pulled them even closer together" (*Novels of Amitav* 118).

In this novel Ghosh gives a new twist to the concept of borders and boundaries. These borders and boundaries are not real; they are more on the plane of imagination. However, every one seems in this novel to be hovering over the issue of borders and boundaries. Every one has his or her imaginative world with a touch of reality. Urbashi Barat notes:

They interlink and participate in each other, so that in the end the boundary between fact and fiction, imagination and reality, disappears and everything becomes part of an imaginatively perceived experience of real life. The shadow lines between people and between the countries they inhabit and call their own, too, merge and become one. (*Novels of Amitav* 118)

It is a well known fact that all human beings as well as places are created by One Almighty and it is a fact that He has not drawn any dividing lines. Consequently, it is surprising that people believe in such false notions and confine their own possibilities by building imaginary walls that segregate. The novelist seems to recommend to the readers that people need a change in their attitudes and a feeling of belonging to the whole world. It is only through this enlarged vision that they can cross the borders and boundaries of their minds. In fact, all the man made things are superficial and transitory so also are our geographical divisions. When people come to reality, through reality they discover the truth that borders and boundaries are artificial and futile and should be crossed. It is worth while to conclude with A.N. Kaul's words, "Crossing of frontiers—especially those of nationality, culture and language—has increased the world over, including India. Of this tendency *The Shadow Lines* is an extreme example" (299).

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