

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* as a Political Novel

Nasihul Wadud*

Abstract: *Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines delineates many of the political issues related to the partition of the subcontinent. The paper examines how the narrativized fiction of Ghosh creates the human story behind the political history that is responsible for the creation of nation-states. It explores various characters across the territorial divides to give a human face to political facts.*

The Shadow Lines is a political novel. The feeling of nationalism is prominent throughout the novel. According to Kapadia (1990), "*The Shadow Lines* focuses mostly on the meaning and nuances of political freedom in contemporary life" (123). In order to gain political freedom, Tha'mma, one of the central characters of *The Shadow Lines*, pledges to take an active part against the British Empire during the struggle for the independence of India. When asked by the narrator what she would have done if she had the option of killing the English magistrate, Tha'mma replies, "I would have been frightened ... 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" (39). Tha'mma is a nationalist. She seeks freedom anyhow.

Tha'mma is a major character in *The Shadow Lines*. She is a "modern middle class woman" according to Tridib. Tha'mma was born in 1902 in "a big joint family, with everyone living and eating together" (121). While she is in college doing her BA in History in Dhaka, she comes to know about the "terrorist movement" amongst Bengal nationalists. She starts getting some ideas "about the secret terrorist societies like Anushilan and Jugantar and all their offshoots, their clandestine networks, and the home-made bombs with which they tried to assassinate British officials and policemen; and a little about the arrests, deportations and executions with which the British had retaliated" (37). One day, policemen raid a class when a lecture is going on to catch a "shy young man" accused of killing an English Magistrate in Khulna. It is revealed later that he is a part of a secret "terrorist movement." The young man inspires Tha'mma. She wants to be a part of the Indian Nationalist Movement and do everything in her power to liberate India. Tha'mma runs secret errands for aspiring nationalists and even cooks food for them. She receives a setback though when she is widowed with a son at the age of thirty-two. She shows her gutsiness by raising her son single-handedly in a patriarchal society. Moreover, she takes up work as a school teacher. She starts life as a tenant in a one-room apartment in Calcutta. Without seeking help from anyone, Tha'mma displays her guts by raising her child who later becomes a general manager in a private firm and moves his family to a new house on Southern Avenue, opposite the Lake with "rooms upstairs, rooms downstairs, verandas, a garden as well as a roof big enough to play cricket on" (119). Tha'mma returns to Dhaka to meet her Jethamoshai in 1964. She finds Dhaka to be a completely different city. She is not able to relate to many things she had left behind in Dhaka. Her nationalistic feeling is shaken, however, after the death of Tridib, which is the climax of the political theme

* Lecturer, Department of English, Stamford University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

of the novel (Kapadia 1990). In *The Shadow Lines*, political events change many peoples' fortunes.

In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator questions the ideology of nationalism. Religious Nationalism led to communal strife during partition. Both Hindus and Muslims fought against each other then and many died while crossing the borders created by the leaders of India and newly formed Pakistan. Tha'mma's nationalistic feelings inflame her. Her patriotism was reinvigorated when she found her shy classmate showing his bravery in attempting to plot the downfall of an English Magistrate in Khulna although he was nabbed by the British police who put him under the line of fire for his involvement in the murder of an English magistrate.

Ghosh seems to be implying that many innocent people die in nationalist movements because of various reasons. People fight for the nation. They want to secure a spot for their respective nations on the global map by fighting for their rights. In Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, we see that Tha'mma's notion of the nation and nationalism contributes to the murder of Tridib.

Tha'mma reminds one of the obstinate neighbors in Robert Frost's famous poem, "MendingWall":

He moves in darkness as it seems to me~
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well."
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors.

In Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall," the narrator keeps insisting to the obstinate neighbor that "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," but the neighbor seems to pay no heed to this saying. He remains obdurate, insisting that the separation of land is better than living without a fence. Similarly, in *The Shadow Lines*, Tha'mma looks to avenge her enemies at any cost for protecting her country from all evils. However, in the end, Tha'mma is treated as a foreigner in the place of her birth. It is demoralizing for Tha'mma who considers Dhaka her *desh* or country. Tridib's murder in Dhaka just adds more pain to her woes.

Tha'mma cannot come to terms with the changing political scenario in the post-British era. She is still "trapped in her pre-national spatial identity" (Gera 109). She is not aware of the definition of "the modern border" which is "political but real," (Gera 113). She now finds the freedom of the post-independent period to be contradictory to her idealistic notions of life without borders. Grandma cannot believe that she has to write Dhaka as her place of birth and India as her nationality in the passport application form. She cannot understand why her place of birth has to be differentiated from her nationality. Grandma lives a "middle class life in which, like the middle class the world over, she would thrive believing in the unity of nationhood and territory, of self-respect and national power" (119). She fails to come to terms with a "new world order" where borders are marked by passports, and not by trenches. Tha'mma visits Dhaka not only to visit her old home but also to bring her uncle back to India. Before returning to Dhaka for a short stay, she dreams of seeing the old Dhaka that she knew in her childhood. But she does not realize that the Dhaka she had left behind and the Dhaka she has seen in

her return visit to her homeland are not the same. She cannot understand why her place of birth has come “to be messily at odds with her nationality” (152). Gera adds:

Tha'mma's search for the pre-partition Dhaka of her childhood and youth is projected as nostalgia for home. Tha'mma's attempt to identify herself as a native Dhakaian from the older parts of the city, who is contemptuous of the alien inhabitants of the new residential localities, records her amnesia in relation to her new Indian identity when confronted with more compelling claims of an older solidarity. (110)

Gera seems to have referred to Tha'mma's state of mind during her second visit to Dhaka. Tha'mma tries her best to find old glimpses of Dhaka then. She cannot come to terms with the changing world. She is an Indian and not a resident of East Bengal anymore. Her homecoming also leads to a sudden twist of fate. Tha'mma could never expect Tridib to fall victim to the communal riots of 1964. She has no sense of the political animosity between India and Pakistan. The loss of the prophet's hair in Hazratbal in 1964 had seen rumor and violence spread over India and Pakistan. Tha'mma had no way of knowing that Tridib would be murdered in her beloved Dhaka. She had tried unsuccessfully to affiliate herself with her homeland. The same people whom she thought of as friends turn out to be her enemies.

People of different nations are separated by boundaries. Borderland disputes are created by people. In “The Burthen of the Mystery: Imagination and Difference in *The Shadow Lines*,” Mee observes, “the identities for which the people have spilled their blood are shifting, affected by the aspirations of the people themselves, and that boundaries are capable of being redrawn” (95). There is no fixed identity. Dhaka was Thamma's own country before the partition. Her return to her birthplace was not a pleasant experience. Each of her travel companions was treated as a foreigner even though Tha'mma thought Dhaka was her home, albeit one away from another home in India. Reality was too harsh on them. Each of them had to fill in the passport forms to collect visas to visit Tha'mma's uncle living in East Pakistan. During the reign of the British Empire there were no separate boundaries between the subcontinent nations. There was only one country, India, to define the whole subcontinent. Partition brought a change to the overall scenario. Constant changes in international politics on or before the Partition led to maps being redrawn and also brought changes in people's aspirations, objectives and expectations from their newly established country.

The logic behind the Partition still vexes many people. They try to rationalize the reason behind this event. Everyone has their own viewpoints regarding the Partition of India. Many still support the separation of India. However, in *The Shadow Lines*, Tridib shows no concern about politics. He is seen busier with national and international geographic channels of the world. We do not see him sharing his ideas about the Partition. On the other hand, characters like the narrator's parents have taken the separation of India as a normal course of life. They are not overwhelmed by the changes in politics. They treat every day as it comes. However, Tha'mma does not understand the reason behind partition. She is stuck in her past. She always takes great pride in her nationalistic feeling without understanding the ways of the changing world. In her return visit to her homeland seventeen years after she had left Dhaka in 1947,

Tha'mma "comes to know that border does not mean a solid wall put between two countries" (Alam 159). Tha'mma exclaims,

If there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? . . . what was it all for then – partition and all the killing and everything – if there isn't something in between?

Tha'mma's son tries to erase her confusion regarding the changing political scenario. He explains to her that a boundary epitomizes "authoritative control" and not "physical geographical control" (Alam 159). He says, "The border isn't on the frontier: it's right inside the airport" (*TSL* 151-2). Tha'mma is distraught when she hears that she has to collect a visa to go to Dhaka. Before the partition, she "could come home to Dhaka whenever I wanted" (152). She always feels proud of her Indian identity. She wants to bring her uncle back to India in order to make him feel more comfortable in familiar surroundings. Mee observes,

the grandmother's very desire for national tidiness, for firm boundaries operating to guarantee a sense of self-presence, the desire to bring her family home to India, starts to unravel her faith in the stability of national identities. (95)

Tha'mma's attempt to take her uncle back to India, however, ends in a tragedy: her uncle, her nephew and Khalil, the rickshaw puller, are all killed in a riot.

Ghosh's search for "the little stories of small places" in family chronicles and neighborhood yarns makes him dig up histories buried and forgotten under the edifice of nationalism (Gera 110). Gera observes that Ghosh's novel examines the relevance of nationalism's concern with geographical restoration in the context of a new borderless, global landscape (111). Ghosh tries to go past the dominant Eurocentric discourse with a view to retelling the events of 1964 in order to give voices to those people who are never heard in mainstream history. Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* attempts to explore the almost forgotten incidents of the 1964 riots that took place in Kolkata and Khulna. He tries to throw light on the often ignored events of that year. They would have been forgotten to many if Ghosh had decided not to historicize that turbulent period. The narrator of *The Shadow Lines* himself could not gather first-hand knowledge about that incident. He had to leaf through many newspapers to discover the truth of the events of that period.

Tha'mma's feelings of nationalism are related to her idealistic views about self-esteem and the importance of national power. She does not like Ila's decision to stay in England. Tha'mma thinks only the British have earned the right to live in England because "It took those people a long time to build that country ... years and years of war and bloodshed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood ... War is their religion. That's what it takes to make a country" (*TSL* 77-78). Nationalism, the product of those times, carries for her the creed of religion, and informs her thoughts and deeds (Bhaduri 107). That is why the English can enjoy the privilege guaranteed by their country. She feels that Indians have no right to live there and enjoy the facilities that they have not earned. Similarly, Tha'mma's uncle does not believe in displacement. He does not want to see himself in India. Tha'mma fails to

change his mind. When she requests her uncle to leave his house for a better life in India, he makes a scathing attack on the notion of nationhood and nationalism. He says, "I don't believe in India-Shindia . . . I was born here and I'll die here" (215).

Tha'mma's uncle's remark indicates the resentment of people of the subcontinent suffering because of the decisions taken by Jinnah and Nehru on the basis of "Two Nation Theory" which led to conflicts and the struggle for power caused by political and economic self-interests. Tha'mma's uncle does not have any trust in politics. He does not want to shift to a new country to lead the life of an exile.

Ghosh depicts the politics of maps in subtle ways. In Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator compares the drawing of boundaries with the game of houses which Ila commands her young cousin to play through a willing suspension of disbelief. Ila says, "Don't you understand? I've just rearranged things a little. If we pretend it's a house, it'll be a house (70). Similarly, "rearrangement" and "pretension" are key words for the birth of nations. Most nations are created out of rearrangement, illusion and disillusion. The birth of a nation depends on the fixing of boundaries. A new nation is born out of the destruction and reconstruction of old boundaries. According to Gera, "Ghosh uncovers the same strategy of 'rearrangement' and 'pretense' in the birth of nations, which he extends to the very process of the construction of reality" (116).

The notion of freedom is intermittently discussed in *The Shadow Lines*. Almost everyone is seen doing something to be free. However, the concept of freedom varies from person to person. Tha'mma's believes in gaining freedom at any cost. A riot takes away the life of her innocent nephew Tridib. She is left with huge despair after the assassination of Tridib and her uncle. Tha'mma's friends turn out to be her enemies. After the incident, Tha'mma tells the narrator: "I gave the chain to the fund for the war . . . For your sake, for your freedom. We have to kill them before they kill us: we have to wipe them out" (237).

On the other hand, Ila has a different notion of freedom. Though born an Indian, Ila opts to be English. She seeks freedom of a different kind. She likes leading a life without restrictions. She has an Indian body but a British mindset. She picks a fight against Robi when she is warned by her brother not to dance with other men at a party. However, Ila cannot lead life as freely as she wants to. Her overwhelming passion for Nick curbs her desire to lead a free life. Ila's freedom is restricted after she gets married to Nick. She has to worry about Nick's alleged extra-marital affair with another woman but she fails to detach herself from Nick. Because of her devotion towards Nick, Ila at one point prevents the narrator from developing a relationship with her. She is restricted by her own chores. Nick uses her as an object, but because Ila has a sacrificing nature, she tries every means at her disposal to keep the relationship with Nick intact. At the end of the novel, readers see her inability to attain the kind of freedom she had always desired. She marries the same Nick who let her get beaten by a racist gang from his class. She is also jealous of Magda, the white doll. Ila belongs to those kinds of people who believe that everything white is beautiful. Speaking of Ila, N. Eakambaram says, "She (Ila) seems to be the kind of person who is not attached to any particular place" (101).

Tridib is one of the most attractive characters of *The Shadow Lines*. He is a charismatic figure who helps expand the horizon of the narrator, giving him "worlds to travel in" and "eyes to see them with" (20). Tridib teaches the narrator to "imagine with precision" (34). He is a renaissance man. His knowledge knows no bounds. He is a

romantic at heart. Tridib's knowledge of English places (despite the changing shift of events, construction and reconstruction of places that contradicted Tridib's knowledge of places with the narrator's expectations) helps the narrator to find many places similar to his uncle's description while he is pursuing his doctoral studies. As the narrator notes: "despite the clear testimony of my eyes it seemed to me still that Tridib had shown something truer about Solent Road a long time ago in Calcutta"(57). Tridib believes in cosmopolitanism. He is "happiest in neutral, impersonal places – coffee houses, bars, street corner adda – the sort of place where people come, talk and go away without expecting to know each other any further" (9). He has a positive attitude towards life. He hates people who "sink to the bottom of the sea of heartbreak when they lose sight of the herd" (18). Tridib likes the story of "a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman across-the seas" (186). He has an affair with May, a lady who lives in faraway England. We are told in his correspondence with May that he desires "to meet as the completest of strangers—strangers-across-the seas – all the more strangers because they knew each other already . . . in a place without a past, without history, free, really free, two people coming together with the utter freedom of strangers" (144). Tridib comes across as someone who swims across the frontier with his storehouse of knowledge. Unfortunately, the destruction of fratricidal politics of the subcontinent kills his life.

Politics gets murkier when there is violence involved. It is hard to tone down the scale of violence within a short span of time. People run amok at the time of violence. Many people get killed because of the violence which has a detrimental effect on children's mindsets. In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator recounts his own experience of violence during the 1964 communal riots which led to the closing down of many schools and the police baton charging rioters in Calcutta and Khulna. The day when Tridib is murdered in Khulna, the narrator himself goes through a traumatic experience in Calcutta as "the streets had turned themselves inside out" and "the city" seemed to have "turned against all school children" (164). One of the narrator's school friends, Tublu, cried all the way for "all of us" (164). Everyone gathered around Tublu to console him. There was complete silence around everyone. The narrator compares the fear that he had experienced then with an earthquake. However, the fear they faced, the narrator believes, was beyond comparison. The narrator remembers his school mates starting to empty water bottles, fearing that they were poisoned. Moreover, mobs threw stones, pebbles and brickbats at school buses. While speaking of the tumultuous period, the narrator recollects how fear gripped the school children:

It is a fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets one inhabits, can become, suddenly and without warning, as hostile as a desert in a flash flood. (204)

Fear grips everyone when there is violence involved. When violence is raging, everyone fears that something ominous is going to happen. The spread of rumors also adds fuel to the fire. As a result of the impending nature of violence and the spread of rumors, everything becomes very chaotic. Amitav Ghosh stresses that due to social conditioning, the role of rumor in riots or mass movements can become deeply rooted (Kapadia 68). The main cause of communal riots in the novel was the stealing of the prophet's hair, which was caused by a rumor that had no connection with reality. But

Hindus and Muslims fought against each other on the basis of that rumor. By leafing through newspapers, the narrator found out that the real reason for the riots was rumor. In Calcutta rumours were in the air – especially that familiar old rumour, the harbinger of every serious riot – that the trains from Pakistan were arriving packed with corpses . . . with refugees still pouring in, rumours began to flow like floodwaters through the city and angry crowds began to gather at the stations (TSH 229).

In “Silence as Possible Mode of Response in *The Shadow Lines*,” Rao observes that the communal riots “follow their own grotesque logic fed by rumours, devoid of humanity, as is evidenced at frequent intervals in the life of people living in the subcontinent since the Indian independence. The carnage let loose on such occasions is beyond description” (140). The riots erupt all of a sudden. There is no “hint of augury” before the impending carnage takes place. May’s recollection about the tragic death of Tridib epitomizes the scale of violence she experiences, “When I got there, I saw three bodies. There were all dead. They’d cut Khalil’s stomach open. The old man’s head had been hacked off. And they’d cut Tridib’s throat, from ear to ear” (151).

The narrator criticizes states, leaders and politicians who take no measures to stop the murder of innocent civilians. In fact, politicians are never bothered about the number of casualties during mob violence. A government is only interested in toning down the scale of violence by ordering the armed forces to kill anyone who distracts law and order. The armed forces only follow their superiors’ command. They kill violators. According to Rao, “the measure of government’s success or failure depends on the number of deaths that occur. When only a few people get killed, governments have no use for them” (142). It is true that only a few people got killed in the 1964 communal strife, but there is no significant record of the number of casualties. As a result of insufficient data, many people do not have any idea about the scale of violence that occurred during the 1964 communal strife. While leafing through past newspaper records, the narrator found no accounts of the 1964 riots of East Pakistan in a leading Kolkata newspaper, which is “run by people who believed in the power of distance” and they also believed that shadow lines that are drawn to divide countries, regional borders, and “make good fences” to “make good neighbours” have a kind of absolute reality (138). The narrator says: Every word I write about those events of 1964 is the product of a struggle with silence I do not know where within me, in which corner of my world, this silence lies. . . . (218).

The Shadow Lines depicts a riot that occurred between ordinary Muslims and Hindus. Not many newspapers gave this incident the kind of treatment it deserved. It was almost excluded from public records. In *The Shadow Lines*, we find the impact of violence in Khulna where “some shops were burnt down and a few people killed” (227). Riots did spread from Khulna to Dhaka. In one rioting incident, almost “fourteen” people died “in frenzy off Khulna” (228). However, nothing significant happened in Kashmir. In newspaper reports, “there was not one single recorded incident of animosity between Kashmiri Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs” (225). Instead of spreading violence, Maulana Masoodi “persuaded the first demonstrators to march with black flags instead of green and thereby drew the various communities of Kashmir together in a collective display of mourning” (226). This indicates that astute leadership can stop violence from rearing its ugly head, and can metamorphose people of different sects into a united group.

The Second World War and partition displaced many people. In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator's family escapes from Dhaka to Calcutta during partition. In Calcutta, they grew close to the Price family. The two families share a lot of memories. Tridib, the narrator's uncle, went to England for a short period and lived with the Prices during the Second World War. Apparently, the narrator started to depict incidents of his life soon after attaining his PhD in England. *The Shadow Lines* is about passages to and from England and India. Cross-cultural interaction and displacements occur because of partition and the Second World War with many victims resettling in a new land.

Partition traumatized the entire sub-continent. The religious conflicts left a sour taste on people's mouth. The sense of camaraderie that Indian Muslims and Hindus once had took a vicious turn after partition. Both India and Pakistan became antagonistic to each other after 1947. Communal frenzy ended the rapport that people of different religious sects had forged. It put an abrupt end to the shared communal history and culture.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is without a doubt one of the greatest works of Indian literature in English. It is a novel which delineates almost every major issue related to the recent history of the subcontinent. It is especially memorable for the way it delineates often forgotten political events by bringing in characters from each period. In this novel, we find Tha'mma as an avid nationalist; Tridib, a universalist; Ila, a globalist; the narrator's mother as a subservient wife, Robi, a repressed nationalist, and the narrator, an innocent witness to the political conflict of the time. The narrator was not born when the Second World War and partition had taken place. He was very young during the communal strife of 1964. As a result, he could not have known the exact reason behind Tridib's murder. His father resolves the mystery behind Tridib's murder when the narrator grows older. In spite of being ignorant of such political incidents of the subcontinent, the narrator retraces the "story behind a story" – which gives his listeners the chance to know what actually happens through everyone's life when there is violence involved.

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