

# The Pang of Partition in Amitav Ghosh's *the Shadow Lines*

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## Abstract

Indian history is divided into past, present and future. The true national identity lies on the individual awareness and the nation's heritage. The present paper is intended to examination of Amitav Ghosh treats the theme of nationalism and partition in his "*The Shadow Lines*" (1988) and how he describes the concept of nationalism. The continuous prompt of the nation by our ancestors has put into a questioning attitude of people recently. Ghosh views the traditional values by his animated and unendurable ideas. Amitav Ghosh has focused on the political interference in contemporary world in relation to her work "*The Shadow Lines*". The political influence and violence in contemporary world are aptly marked out in this novel. The partition provided the writers with the occasion to write about the plight of the people in the subcontinent in order to bring home mainly to the western world, the impact of British rule, which had previously boasted of civilizing mission. The partition theme in Indian novels in English set the dystopian tune, which would be later on carried on to the tone of the postcolonial theories. Post-colonialism began as recognition of the dominant post-war economic and political conditions which were prevalent all over the world. Amitav Ghosh explores the ideas of nationhood and Diasporas ideas that involve relationships between individuals belonging to the same or to different communities that sometimes transgress and transcend the shadow lines of political borders. *The Shadow Lines* represents Ghosh's most direct confrontation with nationalism and national identity and it is simultaneously about each character's personal identity.

**Keywords:** Nationhood, Diaspora, Post-colonialism, Nationalism, Partition.

The British ruled on the Indian subcontinent between 1858 and 1947. India was considered the jewel in the crown of British Empire. But unfortunately Indian nationals neither had any say in central government nor in local level. The feeling of injustice had created a dream to struggle for freedom among the people of the subcontinent. Finally, the British left Indian subcontinent, but their departure led to the division of the nation into two independent states, India and Pakistan based on the "two nations theory". The process of partition was accompanied by migration, barbaric violence, and brutality, slaughter of innocent people, looting and burning. Intersect between two countries contributed to increase the strife instead of giving desired peace and freedom. Many years after the partition, the people of the two nations are still trying to heal the scars and trauma left behind by this diabolical event of history. Most of the partition related works deal with the immediate violence and oppression during the partition. Violence lies at the heart of these works. Incidents of murder, rape, looting, migration, train massacre etc. are common in partition works. But the inefficacy of partition and its ceaseless traumatic aftermaths are not presented equally. In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh depicts the aftermath and incessant trauma of partition. Ghosh here also questions the validity of freedom that is gained by drawing lines between nations. He recalls the 1964 riots

to justify his point that drawing of borders during 1947 did not resolve the tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities. The novel also delineates how this never ending enmity can bring tragedy in the life of individual's and give traumatic experience that will haunt them in future.

The word “trauma” comes from a Greek word which means “wound”, a separation of bodily tissues. Trauma can be defined as a type of psychological and emotional damage that occurs as a result of a severely distressing event, leading to serious and long-term psychological effects. By individual trauma mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one’s defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively by collective trauma, on the other hand, mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with ‘trauma’. But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared:... ‘We’ no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a large communal body (153-4).

Trauma is a term that can appropriately describe the implication of the partition of Indian subcontinent. In case of partition, the whole Indian subcontinent seems like a body; a diseased body which needs to be treated, which requires dismemberment of it, by creating a severe wound. Again, the country is made up of people who inhabit in it, so the wound would also affect their bodies, minds, hearts and lives. Therefore, the wound is not only a physical wound but also a psychological one. It serves as a traumatic experience to them that will haunt them in future. The memory of that incident would leave a scar upon the minds of millions of people. In reality, Partition was “...a sickening slaughter that would turn friend on friend, neighbour on neighbour, stranger on stranger...” (Collins and Lapierre 182). Not “a surgeon’s scalpel” but “a butcher’s axe” (Collins and Lapierre 289) was required to perform the vivisection of India.

After partition, India and Pakistan are still trying to establish and maintain a secular state with freedom and equality for all, but their attempts are interrupted by the riots. Religious tensions between these two nations have caused disturbance since the partition as Isabella Bruschi says, “... the old ghost of communal hatred, which shook the Indian Subcontinent in 1947, reappears again and again each time causing new outbursts of violence;... the life of the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities has been haunted by recurrent strife...” (25-26). In January 1964, there was clash between Hindus and Muslims after the disappearance of a precious relic from a mosque in Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir. In India there was a militant separatist movement among the Sikhs in Punjab in the early 1980s that finally resulted in the operation Blue Star that left hundreds of troops and civilians dead and injured. Further, on 31 October 1984, Indira Gandhi was assassinated by two members of her Sikh bodyguard. Communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims further reappeared in the 1990s that contributed to the destruction of the Babri Masjid in the city of Ayodha on 6 December 1992. Other than the riots, India and Pakistan were involved in three wars in 1947, 1965, and 1971. Again, Kashmir is a great example of the traumatic aftermath of partition. Mughal Emperor Jehangir once said that Kashmir was “a page that the painter of destiny had drawn with the pencil of creation” (Hay 2). But this “earthly paradise” (Hay 2) becomes the most disputed territory and a point of contention even today. Kashmir had also been partitioned like India, not by legal borders but by invasion and conflict. Thus, Kashmir bears the mark of lifelong enmity between Hindus and Muslims, it becomes a “... insurmountable barrier to their reconciliation” (Collins and Lapierre 550).

The tragedy of partition provided the writers with the occasion to write about the plight of the people in the subcontinent in order to bring home mainly to the western world the impact of British rule, which had

previously boasted of civilizing mission. India got independence through bloodshed and migration. In fact, the partition theme in Indian novels in English set the dystopian tune, which would be later on carried on to the tone of the postcolonial theories. Post colonialism began as recognition of the dominant post-war economic and political conditions are prevalent all over the world. The post-colonial writers all over the world assert that their countries possessed a prestigious history, culture and heritage; and they also valorise the past from which they have drawn the raw materials for their works. The traditional view and territorial entity are the unique character generated through their migration from one region to the other or from one settlement to another settlement are raw source of post-colonial writer's work He has emerged as a prominent writer with the force of sheer verisimilitude and versatility. Besides this, a vast range of characters lend a quality of cosmopolitanism to his subject. His issues are local and global at the same time making the themes universal. His opus is marked with the traits of interdisciplinary and post modernity; continuous innovation and occupation with a variety of subjects. Ghosh is conscious of the role of an author and his own stand on his role as an author. His views on society, language, culture, human relationship, nation and geographical boundaries are all painted with his beliefs. These ideologies also determine his choices as a craftsman of storytelling.

*The Shadow Lines* is the novel deal exclusively with the consequences of the Partition, and mainly concerned with the Partition on the Bengal border. It is important to note that Ghosh happens to be the only major Indian-English novelist who is preoccupied with the Bengal Partition. There was a collective expression of grief, a demonstration of all religions in which Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus alike to took part in. In January 1964 Mu-I-Mubarak was recovered and the city of Srinagar erupted with joy. But soon after the recovery, riots broke out in Khulna and a few people were killed. In pursuing its inquiry in the logic of boundaries in the postcolonial context, *The Shadow Lines* takes up the challenge of representing the complexity of national identity.

*The Shadow Lines* is the mirror image, which runs throughout the novel as a sign of those relations that paradoxically connect nation and individuals even as they divide them. The mirror image in the novel foregrounds the idea of mutual contractedness not only between the narrators and the other characters that surround him but also between the cities of London, Dhaka and Calcutta. As he discovers new meaning and imagines new connection between him and the other characters perception and experiences of space, the adult narrator comes to understand that Muslim Dhaka and Hindu Calcutta are essentially mirror image of each other separated by a looking Glass border. The cause of the riots that killed Tridib in Dhaka also causes the Calcutta riots in which he was trapped as a child. As Thamma believes across the border there existed another reality. Thus in the novel Thamma supremely confident in her belief that real borders separate nations is taken aback when told that she would not be able to see any borderline between India and east Pakistan from the plane. She asks, if there's no difference both sides will be the same. Thamma's conceptual mapping of the nation, which mirrors that of nationalism, is based upon the unifying effects of Tradition represented in her mind under the guise of warfare that constitutes the main ingredient of a country's territorial integrity.

Amitav Ghosh imagines and creates those situations from history and see what happens to an individual life when he/she is part of historical events. History also records the changes and chronology of events. Literature need not necessarily record the changes in chronological manner but represents such changes. Ghosh represents the changes that take place at individual level and at national and international levels. The story of these characters is not told in a contextual vacuum, it instead corresponds to the growth of Calcutta as a city and India as a nation over a period of three decades or more. Significantly, private events

in the author's life and other important characters take place in the shadow of events of immense political significance. So, there is the character name Thamma, the grandmother of the unnamed narrator through whom the issue of the Bengal Partition and the whole idea of Nation, Nationalism and Nationhood gets discussed. The characters and stories are rooted in the solid soil of reality of human life. Ghosh's writings penetrate through various forms and institutions of power in society and seek to comprehend human existence in totality. Power structures have always prevailed and controlled an individual's life. One interesting fact about the organization of the characters within novels is that each character is an individual and integral to the flow of the story. He also interweaves the story in a manner that ruptures any hierarchy of importance amongst characters. So if Tridib is an outstanding character in *The Shadow Lines*, the roles of narrator, May and grandmother are equally vital. Tridib, the eccentric historian cousin through whom the idea of history being challenging gets highlighted. Then there is the third generation Ila, the narrator's second cousin through whom the author brings to fore the issues of Diasporas and racism.

The narrator goes to London for his doctorate work but he feels that he is not new to the place. It is a place which is already known to him. He has seen London through the eyes of his mentor and inspiration Tridib. Tridib's vivid account of London and the narrator's extraordinary imagination makes him feel that he has already visited the place before. The narrator stays in London for about a year but his life is most affected by Dhaka that he never personally visits in his life. The narrator has seen Dhaka through the eyes of his grandmother only. And it is the tragedy that takes place in Dhaka which changes his life forever. He loses his mentor Tridib on the roads of Dhaka when he is killed by a rioting mob along with Thamma's uncle. The nations were divided on the pretext of religions and millions of people migrated from one part to the other. During this migration thousands of people lost their lives and millions were rendered homeless. But the memories of the people could not be divided. People who migrated to the either side always had the memories of their place of birth. They always had in their minds the picture of their nation where they were born and brought up; the nation where they grew up playing in the mud and running in the streets with friends. The line that was drawn by the politicians to divide one nation into two could never divide the sentiments and memories of the people.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* very interestingly presents this fact to the readers through different characters, Thamma being the most obvious one. Thamma epitomizes nationalist movements of India and has been an inspiration for the narrator. He uses his grandmother's eyes to see her life in Dhaka as a young girl, her uncle and cousins, the other side of the big house where everything was upside down. Thamma represents India's national identity in the Nationalist Movement. She is a migrant from Dhaka but her ardent love of India cannot be questioned. She goes back to Dhaka after about 20 years to bring her nonagenarian uncle to Calcutta since there is a revolution going on in Dhaka. In Dhaka she realizes how alien she has become to the place where she was born. She feels as if she is a foreigner. Tridib at this point makes it more vivid when he says, "But you are a foreigner now, you're as foreigner here as May – much more than May, for look at her, she doesn't need a visa to come here" (*The Shadow Lines*, 195). The remark of Tridib shocks the readers. Thamma's visit to Dhaka gives us a peep into her psyche and raises a lot of questions about the lines drawn between nations. While filling in a form in Dhaka, Thamma swiftly fills in her nationality as 'Indian' without any hesitation but she starts pondering while filling in her birth place as Dhaka (Bangladesh). There are a series of questions that arise in her mind. Whether birth in a country gives one the right to nationality, how one's nationality changes if the nation is demarcated. Whether the lines that divide nations also dividing the memories. And like wise. The author does give a very plausible answer to these questions through the character of Jethamoshai, Thamma's uncle. He says,



“I don’t believe in this India-Shindia. ...suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere. What will you do then? Where will you move to...? As for me, I was born here and I’ll die here” (SL 213). And eventually he becomes the victim of the communal rioting in Dhaka. Narrator’s mentor and inspiration Tridib also dies in the incident.

The death of Ukil Babu, Thamma’s uncle clearly throws forward another question that is whether people are safe even in their country. Ukil Babu boasts about his country and says he will die where he was born but whether he ever expected to die like this. Thamma, though born in Dhaka in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan), is a true Indian at heart. She used to dream when she was in college to be a part of the militant groups which were fighting for India’s freedom. She was fascinated by the acts of dare-devilry performed by the freedom fighters against the British imperialists. She didn’t know much about the freedom struggle but she was so ardent a lover of nationalism that she was ready to even wash utensils, cook food and wash clothes if she could become a part of the freedom movement. Riots spread to Dhaka and Calcutta. The toll increased to thousands. Despite the presence of two armies of Pakistan and India, stray incidents of arson and looting continued for a few days. There were innumerable cases of the Muslims in East Pakistan giving shelter to the Hindus, often at the cost of their own lives and equally of the Hindus protecting the Muslims. “But they were ordinary people, soon forgotten ... not for them any Martyrs memorials or Eternal Flames” (*The Shadow Lines*, 230). The situation depicted is similar to the anti-Sikh riots that Ghosh witnessed in Delhi, following the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Though Calcutta and Dhaka belong to two different nations, separated from each other by the borders etched upon the map, the two places are closely bound to each other that the narrator had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other (*The Shadow Lines*, 233). Hence what happens in Dhaka will be certainly reflected in Calcutta even when concerned authorities keep quiet about the event. The narrator comes to the conclusion that the lines separating the two nations are only shadow lines. *The Shadow Lines* can be read as destabilizing the fixed, binary logic imposed on nation of otherness, identity, history and memory in the construction of nationalist boundaries. Thus in *The Shadow Lines* Ghosh represents national identity in a way which forces us to acknowledge the ambivalence of boundaries, even as we accept that partition was necessary. On a metaphoric level is what Tridib tries to do by jumping out of the sure safety of his car during the riots and running towards the Muslim old man he barely knows. The force and appeal of nationalism cannot be wished away, just as death by a communal mob in the bye-lanes of old Dhaka. Dhaka has been Thamma’s birth place but her nationality is Indian. As a young girl, she had thought of fighting for freedom in east Bengal. But those very same people for whom she had been willing to lay down her life are enemies in 1964. Feelings of nationalism had after all motivated the fight against the British. The violence it unleashed by the action of a few fanatics the vengeance that the ordinary Hindu, Muslim and Sikhs wreaked on each other worsened our social sense, distorted our political judgments and deranged our understanding of moral righteousness. *The Shadow Lines* written in 1988 was the author’s response to another unprecedented event in Post-Colonial Indian scene: the 1984 Anti-Sikh riots that swept the nation after then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi were assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards. To begin with supposedly State sponsored, these riots in their magnitude were comparable to the earlier communal agitation of 1947 partition.

The novel situates the 1964 communal riots in Calcutta experienced by the narrator as a young school going boy centrally in the boy’s psyche as well as in his analysis of the difference of perception that pervades the recording of such incidents. In the book these riots and the riots at Dhaka become the occasion for the acid test of our recording systems whether of our history or of our newspapers the author creates a

brilliant job by the use of excessive and mundane journalese that drowns the powerful dominance that it exerts in the author's consciousness. *The Shadow Lines* is the Partition novel examined in this book that really questions the concept of the border, questions very seriously whether the shadow line that we inscribe to separate people into different nations has any validity, or whether it is an absurd illusion. It is Ghosh's contention in this novel that borders themselves are fictive and illusive, that they defeat and negate the very reason behind their ostensible existence. Thamma in *The Shadow Lines* inquires whether she would be able to see the boundary between India and East Pakistan. Ghosh writes through this character, and if there is no difference both side will be the same, it will be just like it used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all for them? Partition and all the killing and everything if there is not something in between. (*The Shadow Lines*, 151) Common prudence of Thamma fails to understand the justification of creating two nations. D. K. Pabby, while presenting comparative study of themes in his article viz. theme of partition and freedom in Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* comments: In *The Shadow Lines*, the development and growth of Thamma character encapsulate the futility and meaninglessness of political freedom which was otherwise supposed to usher in an era of peace and prosperity for all. (*The Shadow Lines*, 156)

Amitav Ghosh has raised a question that whether the partition is a solution to the problems of social unrest on religious grounds or political motivation. The partition creates the feeling of humiliation and agony for the dear and near ones who are compelled to migrate from their home or birth-place merely for the reasons based on whims of political solution of the problem faced by the nation. Shobha Tiwari in her book Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Study comments: Ghosh questions the very basis of modern nation states. It does not matter how many states exist in a continent or subcontinent. It does not change the well-being of its people. Nationhood itself is a mirage because it is not based on any logic. When nature draws line in the form of mountains, oceans, rivers, it is real. But manmade borders are shallow and unjustifiable. Three perspectives of borders are provided by three characters belonging to three adjacent generations as figured in *The Shadow Lines*. The first is spoken by Thamma, the protagonist's grandmother; the second by her uncle, Jethamoshai (that is the protagonist's granduncle); and the third by Robi, Thamma's nephew, who is roughly the same age as the protagonist and is his friend. Jethamoshai had lived in a world where borders were not of paramount importance, and what was regarded as important was one's sense of belonging to the place one was born and brought up in.

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in a severance of the umbilical cord, one that fortified border between nation states with irrational and remorseless violence. The discourse of nationalism, however, affects to make sense of the absurd loss of lives that occurs the novel made the reader to discover that world is not a simple place that can see in atlas but there are so many inexorable facts, hidden in that solid lines as it leads to political aggression and violent bloodshed.

The boundaries between nation are like shadow lines, of hatred and hostility out of national sentiments. The narrator also shows how ordinary people try their best to seek mutual sympathy among various ethnic groups of the subcontinent. There are some people like Thamma believe in not only drawing lines as part of faith but respecting them with blood. The border that carved at the time of partition has led to further brutality in the form of those riots, pogroms and organized historical distortions and cultural depletions with which the history of independent India replete.

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