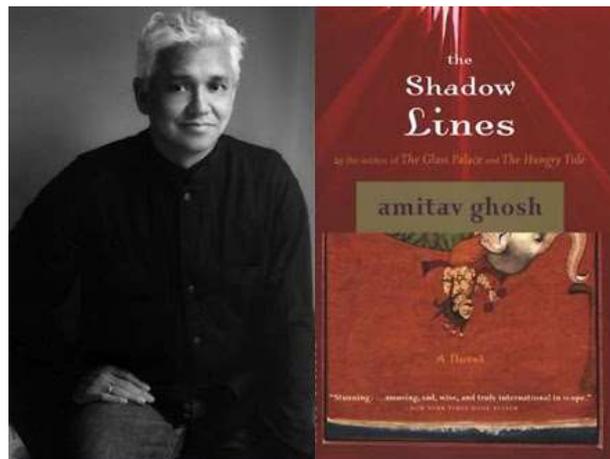


# “THE SHADOW LINES” BY AMITAV GHOSH IS A HISTORY RATHER THAN A FICTION: A CRITICAL INSIGHT IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH.

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A post-modern, post-independent, and a post-colonial writer Amitav Ghosh is remembered for his outstanding contribution in the field of novel and essay. Ghosh, a novelist with an extraordinary sense of history and place, represents the violence of history, geography and politics in general. An extraordinarily fine stylist and a narrator Ghosh is widely read all over the world as a diaspora writer. Like Salman Rushdie, Khushwant Singh and many other contemporary world writers he has taken refuge in the colonized history of the subcontinent. What is interesting in him is his uniqueness in the presentation of themes and techniques. He is known for his diversity of interests in writing and these diverse interests have differentiated him from many other contemporary writers. Being a scholar of social anthropology Ghosh is able to widen his comparative sense of human civilisation and this enables him to penetrate the history of the subcontinent. *The Shadow Lines* is the outcome of his deep critical observation on the history of a colonised nation that achieves freedom after bloodshed and partition. His main concerns in this novel are with Communalism, Colonial power, historiography and social anthropology. The background in which he was born and brought up has enabled him to be so and this is well narrated by the author himself:

*“ Like many Indians I grew up on stories of other countries; Places my parents and relatives had lived in or visited before the birth of the republic of India in 1947”. (Afterword, Burma: Something went wrong.)*

Ghosh as a distinguished writer of the subcontinent comes to prominence in the field of international cultural networks after Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight children*. His ingenuity gradually has begun developing with the publication of his works which resonate some central issues of criticism as Post-colonialism, magic realism, cultural materialism, new-historicism, imperialism and so on. Almost in all his works and in all his essays and journalism, he mediates upon a core set of issues which are significant enough in the postmodern socio-cultural dimension. The issues are-the troubled and troubling i.e. the problems and relationship between the master and the slaves, the legacy of colonial knowledge and discourse on formerly colonized societies, the role of the colonial language after colonialism, the formation and reformation of identities in colonial and post-colonial societies; the emphasis on the recovery of the lost and suppressed histories; an engagement with the cultural multiplicity and difference and sharp intellectual attack on Euro-centrism in general.

History of the nations and the background of Ghosh's novels are interwoven because his novels brim with interesting themes set against fascinating historical backdrops. This is because his roots are in journalism and academic writing- investigation and analysis, a revelation of subterranean connections and patterns. His setting of the stories in his novels engages many radical ideas on the memories of the past and his selection of characters brings closer to the Victorian novelist Dickensian proliferation of characters whose lives engage the readers of his novel and take them to some richly imagined places and times. Ghosh was born in Calcutta on 11<sup>th</sup> July, 1956 after 9 years of official decolonization of the subcontinent. Ghosh' father was a Lieutenant Colonel in the army and later a diplomat. Though he grew up in Eastern Bengal, now independent Bangladesh, and the then East Pakistan but the bitter experience of the partition he had not had to undergo as the family of the author migrated to Calcutta before the cataclysms of 1947, the historic moment of the subcontinent.

It cannot be denied that the background plays a powerful role in the formation of creative art. Ghosh's life begins in Calcutta, then in East Pakistan or Eastern Bengal, now independent Bangladesh and later he travels many other countries of the world as scholar. His worldwide travelling in field work as scholar and teaching has widened his vision of life and altered sensibilities. His experience of travelling has enabled him to observe the world from the perspective of the unsettled, or uprooted social ground where sufferings of the rootless are his core themes. In this context his remark about travelling is significant- "***Travelling is always in some way connected with my fictional work***"—(Anshuman A. Mondal, chap-1, ref, 4). According to some others, Ghosh has visualized 'moment' and 'Time' and it is a well-known fact that he has emphasized specifically the period in his fiction and tried to represent the facts of the time in such a sequence that the readers cannot distinguish the 'time' and 'history'. It cannot be denied that his readers while reading his fiction are connected with a historian not with a novelist except the characters. According to Ghosh reformation is the base of human civilisation and from the contextual perspective his works challenge the assumption that human history is one of 'settled' populations and 'stable' cultures.

Moreover, Ghosh's writing exerts powerful influence of the native city Calcutta which is his imaginative city for all time and he has observed the middle class Bengali culture and the hypocrisy of the so-called Bengali '***Bhadrolok***', the upper middle class and the middle class sophisticated people of 19<sup>th</sup> century. The class emerged as a consequence of the reorganization of the Bengal economy under the colonial rule. In fact, Ghosh himself was born and brought up within such background and this has provided him enough opportunity to represent the cultural, political and intellectual perspectives of the gentle folks known as '***Bhadrolok***' and the low living of the economically backward classes, their everyday living and the gradual upward movement from working class to the master class also to be the most significant context of his novels. ***The Shadow Lines***, the most successful work of the author, is a key note of his personal experiences of Calcutta before and after partition. Meenakshi Mukherjee's observation on him can be well cited:

***" in the precise class positioning of the anonymous narrator of The Shadow Lines whose family is 'Bengali Bhadrlok', starting at the lower edge of the spectrum and ascending to its higher reaches in one generation with family connections above as well as below its own station"***.

The frame work of ***The Shadow Lines*** is the basis of the narrator's memory and an individual's attachment to the world. It is a novel of protest against riots and violence happening on humanity and the aftermath of riots is represented through the family story of the author himself. The memories of 1964 and 1984 have matured him and his writing has newer directions representing the exodus of human civilization. The memories of the 1964 riot traumatize the narrator and he successfully blocks them. In 1984, another riot though the nature of the riot was different revives the trauma and matures him in many contexts. That was a momentous year for India; there was a separatist violence in the Punjab, a military attack on the Sikh Temple of Amritsar, the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on 31<sup>st</sup> October that followed riots again and there was the gas disaster in Bhopal. Such is the historical background that has intensified the author's philosophy of life and reminds George Orwell's infamous date for the apocalypse that had been set with India in mind. Many lives were irrevocably shaken by these events and Ghosh was one among them. "***Looking back***", Ghosh writes, "***I see that the experiences of that period were profoundly important to my development as a writer***"—(*The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi Gandhi*", *The Imam and the Indian*: P. 46)

***"I was twenty-eight. The City I considered home was Calcutta, but New Delhi was where I had spent all my adult life except for a few years away in England and Egypt. I had returned to India two years before, upon completing a doctorate in Oxford, and recently found a teaching job at Delhi University. But it was in the privacy of my baking rooftop hutch that my real life was lived. I was writing my first novel, in the classic fashion, perched in a garret"***. (*The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi Gandhi*", *The Imam and the Indian* P.46-47)

Very significantly Ghosh has identified writing with his real life and always maintained a clear distinction between his teaching- research and writing. Even his multiple dimensional works are still in flux both

in style and technique and his projection of the subcontinent represents his views over the several events. Like Khushwant Singh he has represented the evils of riots within the subcontinent and proclaimed that the events of 1984 have solidified his thinking. The riots of 1984 were the re-assassination of humanity in Punjab. The riots were directed principally against the Sikhs men, and as their ramifications unfolded “*it was not just grief I felt*”, he writes ‘*Rather, it was a sense of something slipping loose, of a mooring coming unmoored somewhere within. Over two thousand and five hundred slaughtered in Delhi alone. “Like many other members of my generation”*’ writes Ghosh,

***I grew up believing that mass- slaughter of the kind that accompanied the partition of India and Pakistan, in 1947, could never happen again. But that morning, in the city of Delhi, the violence had reached the same level of intensity....How do explain to someone who has spent a lifetime cocooned in privilege that a potentially terminal rent has appeared in the wrapping?***

Ghosh’s significant prophetic vision of the subcontinent is transparent in his famous work *The Shadow Lines* where he questions the fate of a country that has diversity since its birth. Drawing of borders is nothing but ‘*The Heart Divided*’, a renowned novel on the context of partition and the essence of the creation of a new nation Pakistan, by Shah Nawaz, a great Pakistani novelist. The arbitrary nature of the border is the main theme of this novel. The shadow lines as noted in the title are subjective, objective, experimental and political. Ghosh has touched the common factors of human civilization where politics of power plays a very significant role and that tries to divide the nations politically and geographically. Sometime the cartographic demarcation of land is settled by borders which are invisible but they are marking the transition from youth to maturity, the past from the present and a journey to the future. Such invisible borders have the power to mark one off from others and one’s own community from others. The invisible borders are turned into material borders as soon as they are politicized and these politically formed physical entities limit the spatial and temporal coordinates of their citizen’s experiences. In form the novel acts out the transgression of these shadow lines, moving across time and space with an ease that challenges the categorical permanence that political borders aspire to represent.

The course of the narratives of the novel is mediated through an unnamed first person narrator who recalls his boyhood admiration of his uncle Tridib. The death of his uncle in a communal riot is the main concern of the narrative background. The riot that destroyed home, displaced families, butchered innocents, raped women, daughters, sisters and marked lines of division had a great impact in the history of the subcontinent. The narrator himself was not present at Tridib’s death but he has to haunt to make a sense of it. His absence does not harm the narrative sequence of the memories where he haunts to make sense. Within this absence the narrator’s whirl of memories is constructed through the assimilation of other people’s recollection of the events which are not void rather they appear lively reminding the historical incidences of ‘Bangha-Bhango’ of 1905 known as ‘The Divide and Rule Policy’ as envisaged in Bengal initiated by the British rulers. Besides these, the narrator introduces his younger brother Robi and an English woman May Price with who he was romantically involved in youth. The narrator assembles himself through their narratives and thus the novel is able to disclose how an identity is patched up or woven through the interconnecting narratives. Even the narrator’s construction of his own identity is the formation of collective identities which repress the self identity of an individual. Some collective identities repress the fragmented narratives which are important parts of history, nation and state. Such incoherent fragmented narratives have the truths that are significant enough to form the memories. The narratives of the *The Shadow Lines* very nicely represent the memories and the future of a nation through the narratives of family history fragmented by the shadow lines. The novel demonstrates the fraught nature of ‘identity’ in the subcontinent and questions the national identities. The national identities are always in trouble because of their intimate and side by side conflicting relationship with the identities as a whole. National borders are also questioned in this novel and mocked at ‘security’ –physical, social, political and existential that borders are supposed to represent. In the subcontinent the identities of nation-state are still in flux as religion determines the identities both fragmented and collective. Partition between India and Pakistan and after 25 years the birth of Bangladesh have matured the nature of the narratives in a greater scale. The partition between the nations traumatizes the history of the sense of nationalism and that sense of nationalism has to be repressed as the public imagination goes with the sense of religion. Religion reappears in the subcontinent’s public imagination as an alternative identity by which to articulate identities around which the inevitable disappointments of modern politics gathers. In this context Sunil Khilnani’s phrase ‘*the pornography of borders*’ can be justified in dealing the post-colonial politics of the subcontinent.

Multiplicity of socio-cultural aspects is the bases of Indian cultural background. This novel is an epitome of cross-cultural epic dimension uniting the East with the West. In the subcontinent culture becomes a part of social and political history and the differences of culture have been able to determine the fate of the nation. The Religious and the cultural differences between Hindus and Muslims have significant role in the

colonial history of India and appeared as help or sometimes hindrance in the progress of the nation. With the advent of the Second World War the Indian leaders demanded freedom from the colonial rulers and with it the separatists demanded partition on religious lines. With the declaration of partition of the subcontinent into Hindustan and Muslim Pakistan, many Hindus from East Bengal, the then East Pakistan came to India as refugees and Muslims left India (especially from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh) with the same pledge. This demarcation on religious lines can displace human being but the bond between man and place remains intact even after a long period of partition. This is presented through the character of Jethomosai in the present novel. This cultural space between the Hindus and the Muslims is another theme that reflects the crisis as reflected in this novel. The deep rooted superstitions play a significant role in the context of public and personal space where the public relation takes its complete turn with the change of time and space. The novel reflects the changes of attitudes of the protagonist, the narrator's Jethomosai who lives in East Pakistan even after partition with changing times. The narrator's Thamma visited East Pakistan to bring that old man back to Calcutta and through her visit the narrator has detailed a man who was once orthodox Hindu, now does let Muslims to enter into his personal space. The so-called 'Cultural religion' divides Jethomosai from the other religious communities and thereby untouchability in the name of cast, creed, race and religion is borne out for another space in his personal life; even once he would not allow a Muslim's shadow pass within ten feet of his food. The very conversation between Robi and Thamma is significantly representing their liberal attitudes and the gradual transformation of human sense from orthodox beliefs to liberalism is another new space of thought. Thamma denounces the so-called orthodox Indians through the character of her Jethomosai-

*And look at him now, paying the price of his sin. (231)*

*Ten feet! Robi explained to May in a hushed whisper, marvelling at the precision of the measurement. How did he measure? He whispered back at my grandmother. Did he keep a tape in his pocket when he ate?*

*No, no, my grandmother said impatiently. In those days many people followed rules like that: they had an instinct.*

*Trigonometry! Robi cried in a triumphant aside to May. They must have known trigonometry. They probably worked it out like a sum: if the Muslim is standing under a twenty foot building how far is his shadow? You see, we are much cleverer than you: bet your grandfather could not tell when a German's shadow was passing within ten feet of his foot.*

In the midnight of 1947 the subcontinent was divided on religious lines and a permanent trouble began since then between Hindus and Muslims. An imaginary line or border between India and East-Pakistan and an abstract religious division between Hindus and Muslim present a distinct space in the novel. It is the space that begets massive migration from one space to the other. This migration from Muslim Pakistan to Hindustan started and the very contrary was discernible in India. Partition divided man, families, relatives and neighbours and history of the subcontinent gave a new impetus. Partition brought genocide and blemished the history of the nations in general. The author's main objective in this novel is to narrate the brutality of human civilization. Innocent men, women and children were mutilated, women were abducted, raped and killed and houses were burnt in the name of religion. Under these political upheavals the narrator's Thamma has come to take Jethomosai back to Calcutta but she finds there another story that is the story of union between man and soil, between two different cultures and between two different religious families. Ghosh is able to represent the life force of humankind that remains intact even after political, social and religious upheavals. The brutality of genocide of East-Bengal and great Calcutta killings presented in this novel reminds us the narrative background of Punjab in the opening paragraph of Khushwant Singh's novel *Train To Pakistan*:

*"The summer before, communal riots, precipitated by reports of the proposed division of the country into a Hindu India and a Muslim Pakistan, had broken out in Calcutta, and within a few months the death toll had mounted to several thousand. Muslims said the Hindus had planned and started the killing. According to the Hindus, the Muslims were to blame. The fact is, both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped. From Calcutta, the riots spread north and east and west: to Noakhali in East Bengal, where Muslims massacred Hindus, to Bihar, where Hindus massacred Muslims" (page-1)*

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