

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*: A Reflection of Dream and Past Reminiscences

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Amitav Ghosh is a well known scholar and novelist of Indian English literature. He has enriched the Indian writing in English with a number of novels, namely *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, *In An Antique Land*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide* etc.

The Shadow Lines is Ghosh's second novel that has won him prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award. It describes different cultures through travels and tours. The travels range from Calcutta to London, London to Calcutta and Calcutta to Dhaka and Khulan in Bangladesh. Benedict Anderson, in his ground breaking work *Imagined Communities*, defines a nation as an "imagined political community that is imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign".⁽⁷⁾ Rabindranath Tagore is rather critical and denounces nationalism as "a cruel epidemic of evil."⁽²⁸⁾

Billy Budd Melville uses a remarkable simile about human affairs, 'Sometimes far-reaching like that of a migratory fowl that in its flight never heeds when it crosses a frontier'. Frontiers need to be crossed or even abolished but that they do not exist and because this idea of non-existent divisions or shadow lines is repeatedly invoked and applied to a wide domain of inner and outer realities, the shadow line we draw between people and nations, which are both an absurd illusion and a source of terrifying violence. People have talked a lot at least about two nations. Because of history this has always and inevitably been their 'complex fate'.

So did Forster in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* with much greater awareness of cultural and other frontiers difficult or impossible to cross. Beginning in colonial times, its story is woven around two families, the Datta-Chaudhuris of Bengal and the Prices of London, the relationship between whom spans three generations and involves several passages to and from India on both sides. Towards the end the story also crosses the newly created frontier—India and Pakistan (now Bangladesh), engaging or acknowledging along the way the approximate presence of other foreign countries and continents through the Indian diplomatic and the U.N. posting of two of the Datta Chaudhuri, 'In 1939, thirteen years before I

was born, my father's aunt, Mayadebi, went to England with her husband and her son, Tridib'. (Ghosh 3)

The past tense narrative here has created a sense of flow of events over a period of time, a sense of history where characters emerge and resolve the tension between their personal and public world of experience. The narrative begins in the year 1939 – the outbreak of the Second World War—and ends essentially in 1964 with the eruption of a cycle of violence in India and Pakistan. In 1939 Tridib, the narrator's father's cousin, then aged 8, is taken to England, and in 1964 he is murdered by a street mob near his mother's original family home in Dhaka. His boyhood experiences in war-time London and his violent death twenty five years later in Dhaka constitute the end-points of the novel's essential narrative. *The Shadow Lines* does not narrate events sequentially, nor is the experience of its narrator hero limited to the events of his own life, for beneath the surface of everyday happenings he lives a 'truer' life in his memory and imagination. Tridib is the hero's mentor and guiding spirit, almost an alter ego, and not only is his boyhood filled with Tridib's London memories, but his own later visit to London is a relieving of the scenes and events of Tridib's experiences there.

Nationalism, a positive historical force that is in hero's aged grandmother, an unabashed nationalist. She is presented as a 'strong' character much feared and even respected, she is also ridiculed as a chauvinist, at best, a still-surviving representative of a fossilised nationalism. For instance, her apprehension about crossing over into Pakistan to retrieve her uncle Dhaka is treated with a banter which puzzles and confuses her. When asked if she really thought that the border was a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other, like it was on a school atlas', she replies, 'No, that wasn't what I meant. But surely there is something-trenches perhaps, or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land'. According to *The Shadow Lines*, however, there is nothing in between. As the hero later realises:

I was a child, and like all the children
around me, I grew up believing in the
truth of the precepts that were available
to me, I grew up believing in the reality
of space; I believed that distance
separates, that it is a corporeal substance;
I believed in the reality of nations and
borders; I believed that across the border

there existed another reality. The only relationship my vocabulary permitted between those separate realities was war or friendship. (219)

The relations between India and Pakistan—it is not a simple matter of either/or but of an original cultural unity or oneness now tragically fractured by the forces of a bigoted politics. Paradoxically all this is acknowledged, yet blithely ignored by the novel.

According to Ghosh, space and in a sense time too, are shadows: misty categories of habitual perception which may veil but can not blot reality, and when heaven's (or the imagination's) light shines the earthly shadows fly, leaving behind an experience of reality that is continuous, seamless and transcendent. I do not know what value one can place on such a far-reaching flight of imagination. Tridib does only teach the hero to use his 'imagination with precision', he also supplies him with distant worlds to travel on and eyes to see them with while the hero is still 'a boy who had never been more than a few 100 miles from Calcutta'. Tridib who could experience the world as concretely in his imagination as we do our senses, more so if anything, since to us those experiences were permanently available in our memories.

Imagination is the key to the novel for it is imagination that unlocks perception and creates experience and meaning: reality is an impenetrable blankness from which we can receive only what we give. A romantic education in the primacy of the imagination is, it would seem all that is needed to prevent the shades of the prison house that the world is from closing upon the growing boy.

In *The Shadow Lines* the shaping force of memory is enormously productive and enabling but also traumatic and disabling; it liberates, and stunts, both the individual imagination and social possibilities; it a restless, energetic, troubling power; the price, and the limitation of freedom; the abettor, and the interrogator, of the form and existence of the modern nation-state.

History is the discipline of narrativizing time. The public chronicles of nations are interrogated in this novel by highlighting on the one hand, the reality of the fictions people create around their lives and on the other recording the verifiable and graphic details of individual memories but all these do not necessarily tally with the received version of history. Tridib, the mentor, on whom the child projected his own self, pointed out

places in Bartholomew's Atlas while telling him stories—Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with.

During the 1964 Hindu-Muslim riots—subsequently forgotten by history—the panic that had gripped the schoolboys in Calcutta had the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear between oneself and oneness image in the mirror. The narrator's best friend was a boy called Mantu (Mansur) who was suddenly transformed into an enemy. Subsequently two governments traded a series of 'symmetrical' accusations as if in a mutual narrative of complicity regarding the riots, while the people on both sides reacted with an 'identical' sense of horror and outrage as there were 'innumerable' cases of Muslim in East Pakistan giving shelter to Hindus, often at the loss of their own lives and equally in India there are cases of Hindus sheltering 'Muslims'. 'The looking-glass border' attempts to create a mirage of otherness but only sees itself reflected. Ghosh underscores this typical inclination of old men for their roots when Saifuddin narrates his father's predilections:

I could not get my father to leave
Motihari to come to Pakistan with us.
He'd grown old there to. (211)

As the ill luck would have it, they finally decided to leave Dhaka when the entire city was riot-strewn. While Khalil was bringing the grandmother's uncle Jethamoshai in his rickshaw, the rioters surrounded and attacked them. Tridib on finding them in their clutches came to their rescue but all three were mercilessly butchered by the crowd.

Works Cited

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