

COSMOPOLITANISM IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES*

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ABSTRACT

Cosmopolitanism is native to Indian mind. Since the dawn of civilization, the Vedic pronouncement “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam” signifying “the world is a family” has been the guiding principle for the Indian ways of life and activities. This ideal as a consciousness and experience is being strongly felt by Indians under the sweeping impact of the current of globalization, and some post-colonial Indian English writers explore it with a cosmopolitan outlook vis-a-vis the limitations of the traditional notions such as national identity, family, belongingness in a composite Indian society. One such writer Amitav Ghosh in his novel *The Shadow Lines* has examined the meaning and relevance of partition, nationalism and the resultant shadow lines from a cosmopolitan angle suggesting the possibility of a larger connectivity through the idea of globalizing brotherhood.

Keywords: cosmopolitanism, globalisation, nationalism, brotherhood, shadow lines.

INTRODUCTION

Cosmopolitanism is quintessentially Indian. It is one of the chief attributes of Indian mind that has been inspiring the Indian societies all through the ages. The Vedic literature is eloquent about this concept which is encapsulated in the famous shloka, “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam” signifying the world as a family (Maha Upanishad 6.71). This is not an elitist or scholastic utterance. It has been in common parlance in Indian households and used frequently in almost all spheres of social and public life. This concept which professes universal brotherhood as the staple for joyful living has helped India embrace different races with varied cultures and assimilate them over the centuries to evolve a common composite cultural matrix, liberal and dynamic at the same time. Seers, saints, poets and patriots like Kabir, Nanak, Chaitanya, Tagore, Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Gandhi have made use of this significant concept supremely and successfully when Indian society came under stress and uncertainties.

This Indian ideal is quite similar to the western concept of cosmopolitanism, said to have originated with the Greek cynic philosopher Diogenes who claimed to be a “cosmopolites” meaning a “citizen of the world” (Wiki 1). The concept is, indeed, a multi-layered and multi-dimensional one which has been very often discussed, debated, interpreted by scholars, philosophers, critics for its relevance and meaning as well as application in different spheres of human activities. Of them, Hannerz’s view that cosmopolitanism is “a perspective, a state of mind or a mode of meaning”; “an orientation, a willingness to engage with the other” appears to be plausible and relevant in the context of India in so far as it is a consciousness and experience being vividly felt by Indians in the scenario of fast globalisation (Hannerz 238-239). Globalization as “neo-liberal deregulations, the creation of global market...” has blurred the boundaries of nations, cultures and the value systems and across the globe (Guibernou 431). It is an experience of unprecedented interrelatedness with regard to economies, political agendas, cultural phenomena; an experience of a sense of belonging to “the global village” (McLuhan 31). This has facilitated resurgence of cosmopolitan outlook in a more progressive and practical manner in tune with the changing face of the nation. At the same time, globalisation, effecting mobility and migration in a massive scale has brought about a kind of hybridization of cultures that problematizes the customary notions of belonging and identities. Such phenomena have accentuated the postcolonial sense of anxiety, loss and bewilderment and thus necessitates a broader consciousness capable and capacious enough to engage in meaningful dialogues and relationships in the matrix of nationalism. Such a peculiar state of affair as stated above has intrigued most of the postcolonial writers of India, particularly the new generations of avante garde novelists writing in English. They explore and experiment this Indian experience by employing new techniques and themes in their works. Most of them grapple in search of suitable narratives as they find the master narratives of the preceding generation uninspiring, inadequate and out of sync with the emerging realities. The earlier novelists namely the great trio-Anand, Narayan, Raja Rao and others were basically nationalists and wrote in the Gandhian era. Their themes were “Pan-Indian” (Mukherjee 173); they shaped up a national voice in keeping with the time and spirit of a newly decolonized nation (Paranjape 402). The halo of that era was gone as the nation came under the strong current of globalization affecting each and every sphere of life and society. The new realities invested the writers with a sense of urgency to look at the emergent scenario afresh, not with a traditional nationalists spirit but with a cosmopolitan mind. They started questioning, among other things, the limitations of the conventional notion about national identity, rootedness of family etc. in a multi-linguistic, multicultural, multi-faith society evolved through constant assimilation over the ages. They, however, did not seek to undermine nationalism. Rather, they strived to

assess the scope for placing the nation in relation to the globe by viewing the compatibility of nationalism with globalism through national prism as well as from a cosmopolitan perspective. Notable among such novelists are Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Aravinda Adiga, Amitav Ghosh, to name a few. Amitav Ghosh is a pioneer in positioning himself as a cosmopolitan while keeping his feet firm on the indigenous soil.

OBJECTIVE

The Shadow Lines, a widely acclaimed fiction of Amitav Ghosh has been taken for the current study. The objective of this research paper is to show how the novelist in examining the meaning and relevance of partition, nationalism, and the resultant shadow lines from the viewpoint of a cosmopolitan, has found the possibility of achieving a larger cultural connectivity beyond these lines through the idea of globalizing brotherhood.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is research based and qualitative in methodology sourcing materials from reference books, journals, and internet. The cited materials have been examined with regard to their relevance to the objective of this paper and have formed part of the findings.

DISCUSSION & FINDINGS

The chief points for discussion is (i) the meaning and relevance of the shadow lines in the context of nationhood; (ii) the possibility of looking beyond such lines in a bid to secure larger cultural connectivities through cosmopolitanism.

The writer has chosen characters, both Indian and British belonging to three generations; located the events at three cities namely Calcutta (now Kolkata), Dhaka and London; set his narrative over a period of about twenty-five years between 1939 and 1964; the two ends being crucial in that the former marks the beginning of the Second World War and the latter the communal riot in Dhaka. The unnamed narrator supposed to be the alter ego of the novelist employs his memory and imagination in a non-linear narrative technique; travels backward and forward frequently, blends time and space into a simultaneous reality in his search for the meaning and relevance of the key themes.

The major characters, by their disposition and conduct speak much for the novelist's thought on nationalism, the shadow lines and cosmopolitanism. Tha'mma, the grandmother of the narrator is a staunch nationalist, a dedicated teacher who believes strongly in rootedness and belongingness. A native

of Dhaka of pre-independent India, turned widow prematurely, migrated to Calcutta, settled with her son and grandson by earning a living as a hardworking, disciplined teacher. Tridib, narrator's uncle is a cosmopolitan with imagination, who supplies the narrator with distant "worlds to travel in and eyes to see them with" while the narrator is "a boy who had never been more than a few hundred miles from Calcutta" (Ghosh 20). Ila, the narrator's cousin and Tridib's niece is a globe trotter from childhood for whom all "times and places are the same", because "they happen to look alike, like airport lounges". She lacks memory and imagination. Thus, even though she "had lived in many places, she had never travelled" (Ghosh 21). To A.N. Kaul, "Ila has seen much but experienced nothing. She remains unchanged, undergoing meaningless repetitive patterns of events and sensations. For happenings and places are not experiences" (Kaul, A.N. 306). The narrator, then a small boy, as a true disciple of Tridib believes like a cosmopolitan that "a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one's imagination" (Ghosh 21). For him, "Tridib's stories are a gateway to the other world" (Kaul, Subir 277).

Ghosh questions the national identity, exposes the futility of "the Shadow Lines" through Tha'mma, who inherited from the past her nationalism as a borderless awakening requiring sacrifice. However, her nationalism met with a rude shock during his visit to Dhaka, when Tridib, her nephew and Jethamoshai, her old uncle were killed before her eyes by a group of senseless, bigoted rioters near her ancestral home in Dhaka. The incident occurred when Tha'mma, accompanied by her sister Mayadebi, Tridib, Robi and May Price was trying to bring Jethamoshai to Calcutta. The news of the disappearance of Mu-i-Mubarak, the holy relic of Prophet Mohammed from the Hazratbal Shrine in Srinagar triggered communal violence. Tridib, Jethamoshai and Khalil whom Jethamoshai gave asylum in his house and who, in turn fed, protected and respected him became the victims of the mindless act. Suvir Kaul has critically described this situation as:

Perhaps the crowning irony of *The Shadow Lines* is that almost as soon as Tha'mma realizes that the legacy of her birth place is not separable from her sense of herself as a citizen of India, her nephew Tridib's death at the hands of Dhaka mob confirms in her a pathological hatred of 'them' (Kaul Suvir 283).

Tha'mma now has come to realize that partition has not only divided the nation but also created shadow lines in the minds of people which are source of terror and violence. This incident which is the most significant scene of the novel changed her sense of nationalism. Earlier, her nationalism never allowed the existence of real border line dividing the fellowmen on the other side of the frontier. While she sets out her journey to Dhaka through flight, she is confronted with the confusion of identity with

regard to her nativity and national identity. Her native place does not match with her nationality. Her home now belongs to another country, visit to which requires a passport and a visa. She “wanted to know whether she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane” (Ghosh 151). She believes there are “trenches perhaps, or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other or even just barren strips of land” (Ghosh 151). When she reaches Dhaka, she feels like an outsider and asks, “where’s Dhaka?” (Ghosh 194). Tridib points out to Tha’mma, “But you are a foreigner now, 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” (Ghosh 195). Here, Tha’mma is struck with the reality of the border lines dividing and restricting fellowmen on both the sides. Her perplexity and doubt gets a very plausible and pertinent rejoinder from the old Jethamoshai, who does not want to move anywhere out of his birth place. With a faded memory and incoherent mind, he tells Tha’mma who was exhorting him to come to India:

Once you start moving you never stop. That’s what I told my sons when they took the trains, I said: 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? No one will have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I’ll die here (Ghosh 215).

His words expose the futility of the border lines and show they are the shadow lines in the minds of the people. Ironically, Jethamoshai died where he was born, as a victim at the hands of fellowmen in communal riot. The further irony is that Khalil, a Muslim who fed and protected the Hindu Jethamoshai was killed by the communal elements. Tridib, a cosmopolitan by attitude, also succumbed to these communal forces. Tha’mma who was already awakened to the prohibiting nature of border lines has come to realize that they are not the actual lines on the ground. They are shadow lines overpowering the minds of people and are sources of terror and violence. The blurb of the text “The Shadow Lines” very appropriately sums up the intention of the writer:

This novel focuses on the meaning of political freedom in the modern world and the force of nationalism, the Shadow Line we draw between people and nations, which is both an absurd illusion and a source of terrifying violence (Ghosh, blurb).

By delineating this incident as such, the writer not only lays bare the meaninglessness of shadow lines invented by politicians but at the same time implicitly expressed his longing to look beyond such lines. For Ghosh, the border lines are shadow lines, arbitrary and invented. In contrast to Tha’mma new-

found realization, these shadow lines cannot divide memory or experience. The writer's portrayal of the cordial relationship of an upper middle class Bengali family with a British family over three generations is suggestive of his notion. Friendship between Justice Datta-Chaudhuri and Tresawsen; their heirs Mayadebi and Mrs. Price; Tridib and May, Ila and Nick continue such relationship despite division of nationality, religion and culture. When Mayadebi was staying in London with Mrs. Price family for an operation of her husband, she expressed the friendly London environment and the fellow feeling to Treaswsen. "Everyone was so much nicer now; often when she and Tridib were out walking people would pat him on the head and stop to have a little chat with her; the shopkeepers would ask her where and how her husband was, and when he was to have his operation" (Ghosh 66).

CONCLUSION

The writer sees nationalism as a liberating force and the shadow lines imaginary and invented. Through the relationship of Ila with Nick, May with Tridib, the writer craves to combine nationalism with globalism suggesting the possibility of a larger cultural connectivity through the idea of globalizing brotherhood which is cosmopolitan in outlook. Despite difference of nationality, religion and culture, Ila loved Nick and married him. May and Tridib fell in love. Finally, narrator's yearning to be a cosmopolitan by passing over the shadow lines appears to have materialized when he and May "lay in each other's arm quietly...." (Ghosh 252).

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