

Mirage of Distance in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract

The researcher unravels the truth of evanescent borders, freedom, nationalism and communalism. The partition of India and that of East Pakistan from West Bengal was unjustified and artificial. They were mirror-images of each other. The migrant diaspora experiences displacement, fragmentation, marginalization and discontinuity in the cultural discourse of the subject country. They yearn for home and want to return to their lost origin; creating imaginary homelands from fragmentary and painful memories of their homelands. The author weaves an intricate web of memories, images and relationships to show the absurdity of the rapidly fading lines carved out to separate the nations. Amitav Ghosh emphasizes on the unified nature of the world. Its focus is the force of nationalism and the meaning of political freedom in the modern world. The shadow line drawn between people and nations are both an absurd illusion and a source of ghastly violence. Amitav Ghosh delineates the subsequent psychological and emotional problems caused by arbitrary divisions.

Key Words: Diaspora, imaginary homelands, memories, marginalization

Introduction

Tha'mma moves to Kolkata after her husband's death. She works as a teacher. India becomes her "inverted country" because of partition. She is dislocated not only geographically but also emotionally and spiritually. She continues to cling to her mental space: Dhaka. Emotionally, India cannot be her real space. The vastness of the new house brings back memories of her huge ancestral home in Dhaka. She uses her imagination and memory to recollect the concrete reality of her childhood home. She desires to return to Dhaka to bring her old uncle back but in truth she yearns to go to that space which once was real, and to see

for herself if the geographical space she still considers her home is so emotionally too. The grandmother is disillusioned when she looks for her determined space – culturally and linguistically and finds it no longer there. "Where's Dhaka? . . . This isn't Dhaka." (195) She finds the new hotels, race courses, and the Cinema hall, all wonderful, "But where's Dhaka?"

This couldn't be it, she cried, It can't be our lane, for where's Kana-babu's sweet Shop?. . . where's the sweet shop gone? . . . The driver rolled his hands sadly in the air and said: There's no sweet shop here; it's all gone. Now there's only this one. (206)

There are changes, both culturally and linguistically. The home is occupied by Muslim migrants from across the border. The grandmother realizes that in real life there are no determined spaces. The house holds an idyllic vision of balconies and terraces, to Mayadevi and grandmother. They spent their evening making up stories about their uncle's part of the house in the garden. Saifuddin puts it to practical use. It served as an automobile workshop. It was all changed, but now grandmother didn't care any longer. It wasn't the house she remembered.

Amitav Ghosh investigates the dialogue between history and fiction, imagination and facts. The narrator scans the old newspapers to retrieve information on the nature and causes of communal riots in Bengal in 1964. He discovers to his much horror that the Kolkata newspapers of 1964 did not give the slightest hint of the impending carnage. There was no news of the communal strife in erstwhile East Pakistan. The loss of the holy relic from Hazratbal shrine in Kashmir was barely mentioned. The narrator now deciphers the concept of distance. Srinagar is about 1200 miles away from Kolkata and Dhaka was in another country hence the theft in Srinagar was underplayed and the communal disturbance in Dhaka was neglected. Hence the narrator's father could not be blamed for not being aware of the communal crises in East Pakistan. The newspaper focused on the conference of the Congress Party of India, the wars in other countries and the split in the Communist Party of India. Amitav Ghosh reveals subtly that a conspiracy of silence led to the unfortunate death of Tridib as the family travelled to the old ancestral home in Dhaka without cognizance of the communal strife

in the city. The narrator realizes that national frontiers created a deceptive sense of distance and of reality. Dhaka is closer to Kolkata than Srinagar yet events in Srinagar are described in detail, whereas the action in Dhaka is dismissed because Kolkata and Srinagar are in the same country.

Distance and space

The narrator grew up believing in the reality of space. He believed that distance is a corporeal substance. There was another reality that existed across the border. The relationship of war or friendship formed a nexus between those separate realities. The narrator's perception of space is always only geographical. He is unable to understand emotional space. Therefore, he tells Tha'mma that she did not know the difference between 'coming' and 'going'. He sees England through the eyes of Ila and Tridib as an eight-year old, only to find real spaces reduced to shadow lines, when he goes there as an adult, because real space never approximates the imagined space. The narrator as a child is unable to fathom why he was oblivious of Chiang Mai in Thailand though it was much closer to Kolkata than Delhi and Chengdu in China though it was nearer than Srinagar. The narrator discovers the truth as a mature young man that space cannot be measured in concrete distances but only by cultural and linguistic identities. The protagonist realizes that Kolkata and Dhaka are merely reflections of each other. The nature of environments cannot be separated from people's experience and images of that environment. The narrator discovers that spatial experiences unconsciously link our perceptions of space and architecture. He learns that his real home is not a geographical structure but an

emotional, moral, and intellectual entity which can be identified in the shadow of one's own inner being. The title, *The Shadow Lines*, indicates that there is no concrete space, either geographically or culturally. Spaces exist only as abstract entities merging into one another: alien space blurring into native space; cultural space into geographical space. The author suggests, space, like all the things rare and beautiful seems difficult to attain.

The narrator experiments with a compass on Tridib's old atlas. His atlas revealed that Chiang Mai in Thailand was much closer to Kolkata than Delhi is; that Chengdu in China is nearer than Srinagar is, yet he had never heard of these places. The narrator cannot remember a time when he had not heard of Delhi or Srinagar. Although, Hanoi and Chungking are nearer Khulna than Srinagar, yet the people of Khulna are unconcerned about the fate of the mosque in Vietnam and South China. The narrator learns that within a radius of 1200 miles from any city in the world, the centre lay as different cities of different countries and only war had the power to draw all the various citizens together. There were only states and citizens in this circle. There were no people at all. The narrator discovers that the cause of riots is often communal sympathies and national passions. Political lines cannot separate people or their common land and realities. He knows now that Dhaka and Kolkata were inverted images of one another. The events which occurred in one place were bound to influence the other. The compass unites what the sword has divided. Tridib ruminates on the futility of borders.

They had drawn their borders, believing in that pattern, in the enhancement of lines, hoping perhaps that once they had etched their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of the prehistoric Gondwanaland. What had they felt, I wondered, when they discovered that they had created not a separation but a yet-undiscovered irony- the irony that killed Tridib. (232)

Amitav Ghosh observes that there were numerous cases of Muslims in East Pakistan giving shelter to Hindus and equally in India of Hindus sheltering Muslims at the cost of their own lives. They were ordinary people who were soon forgotten. The author asserts that states disport themselves on the theatre of war, for it is in the logic of states that to exist at all they must claim the dominance of all relationships between people.

Conclusion

When nature draws lines in the form of mountains, oceans, rivers, it is real. But man-made borders are shallow and unjustifiable. Amitav Ghosh conveys through *Tha'mma* the idea of self and belonging. The grandmother cannot free herself from the memory of Dhaka, her ancestral house and her childhood. She longs for her home in Dhaka. However, she is crestfallen when she sees Dhaka because it is beyond recognition. The grandmother's search for point of fixity is futile and she is astonished to know that there are no trenches to separate the nations. Nationhood itself is a mirage because it lacks rationale. The narrator also finds Dhaka and Kolkata

locked into an irreversible symmetry by the dictates of a line meant to set people free. The narrator recognizes that spaces are not just geographical constructs. There is an emotional and cultural nexus between nations. Robi carries a sad silent burden of knowledge that nothing will change even if the subcontinent is divided by thousands of lines as one cannot divide a memory. The

memory of Tridib's death haunts Robi even after fifteen years. Political lines cannot separate people or their common land and realities. The narrator discovers that national borders created an illusionary sense of distance and of reality. Histories in the text, reveals the affinities and continuities across space and time thereby questioning divisions, produced by the boundaries.

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