

# The Desire for Freedom and Identity Crisis in The Shadow Lines

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Partition of countries and the lines that draw their borders carve out different personalities from the ones directly affected by it. They are separated based on religion, culture or politics and hence a new identity is reshaped. People should not think that these lines can be crossed easily but they are strictly held up to separate everyone. In this novel, the grandmother was a native of Dhaka, Bangladesh but after partition, she was forced to live in India. She doesn't like to accept the fact that she belongs to the refugee population. Her experiences and trauma associated with this partition are because of these shadowy lines. This paper will discuss the characters of Th'amma and Ila who search for their identity and the effect of diasporic dislocation which transforms them consciously or unconsciously. They become victims of their conditions. The stark contrast in their personalities and their concept of freedom would be analysed through this paper.

**Keywords:** Shadow Lines, identity, diasporic dislocation, freedom, nation

Partition gave writers the freedom to write about the miserable condition of people in the subcontinent. This was done to emphasize the impact of British rule. Amitav Ghosh has emerged as a versatile writer who writes about local and global issues, hence providing universality to his themes. He approaches these issues in an interdisciplinary and postmodern aspect of writing; wherein his works can seem innovatively composed around the said themes. Ghosh knows the stand of an author and whatever he writes, he keeps in mind his role. In an interview with Michelle Casewell, Ghosh says that for him the value of novel as a form of storytelling comes from the fact that it incorporates all the varied aspects of life in its pages. From history, beliefs, rhetoric to love, sexuality, family, region; a novel efficiently transcends boundaries drawn by another type of writings. In *Shadow Lines*, Ghosh comes about the topic of nations and diaspora. The main theme of this novel also focusses on relationship ideas between individuals who are either of the same community or different. These relationships are shown to transcend political borders marked by shadow lines. This novel is a direct statement on nationalism and the characters' search for their own identity. A country is defined differently in political science and geography, but it refers to something specific to a person. A man's entire conscious of past, present and future is directly linked to his native land or country. This country is referred to his homeland. Keeping this as the basis of his novel, Ghosh comes up with this novel which sets out to contextualize "nationalism".

One's identity has become a broad area of discussion in postmodern studies. This identity has come up to be changeable according to conditions and fluid in its course. Then a person's identity acquires its meaning and intentions according to priorities. Hence, one's identity is multi-faceted and a subject of constant change. A human's habitation is not constant, they change their places, hence adopting the identity of the culture in which they presently live. They can

adopt a certain image and also live with multiple cultural identities. From the opening of the novel itself, the blurred concept of identity can be visualised. This concept is extended to the places and locations mentioned in the novel as well. Characters are not the only ones struggling with their identity. According to Ghosh, a location's identity is established by the stories and beliefs associated with that place. These stories can be developed by one's power of imagination. All the characters experience Shadow Lines as real lines.

In this novel, the narrator's grandmother has to bear the effects of partition in an extreme sense. This event of partition makes up her identity and this has an influence on her for a lifetime. She finally concludes that borders define and control everyone's life and this border has been controlling her as well. She considers that countries are separated by bold lines, these bold lines then demarcate the boundary of each country. She believes that both the sides of the border are the same and her travel would just be like before when they travelled from Dhaka to Calcutta via train. "But if there aren't any demarcations, how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference then? And if there's no difference, then each side will be the same. it'll be a bit like the previous times when we caught a train from Dhaka and reached Calcutta subsequent day without anybody asking us to stop, What was it all for the partition and every one the killings and everything – if there isn't something in between." She's amazed to see that there's no line in between the two countries which separates them. She then questions the need of partition and the mass killing if there isn't anything that had been done. She imagines some vivid lines to be visible on the ground just like it was on the map. These borders are imaginary for people but only visible politically. This partition had a negative impact on the grandmother because it made her position unstable. The conflict in her mind grew to be eternal and her loving home became a strangely unwelcoming place for her. She then realizes that "borders have a tenuous existence and no amount of bloodshed in history can either make them real or imperishable." [1] grandmother's nationalist notion survives in her.

The grandmother Thamma, until her retirement, felt that "one should not keep holding on to the past and should focus on building a future." She also doesn't like to be sentimental and nostalgic and considers it a weakness. But after her retirement, she feels the longing for her old home in Dhaka. A bit later she comes to the realization that "displaced people" do not have any home to go back to [2]. On arriving at Dhaka, she feels that this place is no longer the same as she knew it to be. Dhaka is not confined to her home, and she has no place to call "home" because she doesn't belong to this place anymore. The price she has to pay for visiting Dhaka is Tridib and the uncle, she loses them. Now she understands, Borders are drawn in people's mind and conscience, and the concept of a home only exists in one's memory. The psychological conflict of her home and nationality causes her some trauma. This trauma leads to her not being able to distinguish between "coming home" and "going away". Her memories of partition are avoided and repressed as suggested by Kaul. This expression of coming and going, instead of belonging is explained as family's love; "You see, in our family, we don't know whether we're coming or going it's all my grandmother's fault but in fact, the fault wasn't hers at all: it lay in language. Every language assumes a centrality, a hard and fast and settle point to travel faraway from and are available back to what my grandmother was trying to find, was a word for a journey which wasn't a coming or a going in the least, a journey that was an enquiry for precisely that fixed point which allows the right use of verbs of movement."

Through the course of the novel, the narrator is taught that lines i.e., the border, denies the people their true identity. Ironically, borders are meant to affirm differences, but these differences set people apart and can either lead to friendship or enmity. The invisible lines mark people to be different from each other even though they share the same

culture, appearance, food and so on. Partition gives rise to a conflict of identity in one's mind in return for riots, bloodshed and terror. This separation of countries defines the identity of a person. According to Neogy, the partition is a "narrative of displacement, and dispossession, of large-scale and widespread communal violence, and of the realignment of family, community and national identities as people were forced to accommodate the dramatically altered reality that now prevailed" [3]. People are forced to accept their new reality and think of it as their own now.

As opposed from Thamma, Ila's dislocation from diaspora sets her free from her own idea of home. "Diaspora doesn't mean just geographical dispersal. It also refers to the question of one's identity, memory and home which is produced by such a displacement" [4]. Ila doesn't possess the sensibility of a struggling migrant who needs to find shelter rather she bears the personality of a person cut off from her roots and one who is carelessly living. She doesn't represent the idea of homelessness and doesn't even want to get into the struggle of finding one for herself. Ila's globe-trotting nature has robbed her off of her own imagination. Tridib explains in his statement about Ila that, even if she has lived in some places throughout the world, she has definitely not felt what travelling feels like". He uses this statement to explain Ila's instability at one place. This is in stark contrast to the narrator's saying about Tridib that he gave the narrator different worlds to travel and also eyes to see them.

Ila's concept of freedom is totally different from that of the Grandmothers'. Both of them have the notion of freedom intact in their minds and personality but act as if they are poles apart. For Th'amma, freedom meant the liberation of her nation from colonization, she was a nationalist in all sense. Violence is considered fine for her when associated with freedom and liberty. Whereas, for Ila, the concept of freedom was more radical. Freedom for her is to be free from her culture and free from all the restrictions and responsibilities that come hand in hand when someone belongs to one culture. Their concept of freedom is moulded by the place in which they live. Grandmother and Ila's relationship is an emblem of the conflict between native nationalism and migrant tendency. Ila takes the responsibility of representing the post-modern woman who lives an independent life in London. She is away from every kind of conservative approach, patriarchal norms and restrictions of the society of Calcutta. She rejects her native culture, and in return the migrant culture rejects her, this rejection of both ends traps her in a never-ending battle of finding one's true identity. Ila wishes to live her life in the present while being a part of some foreign culture. She doesn't want her past to keep lingering behind her. But for the grandmother, this attachment that Ila shows towards the western culture is annoying. She disapproves of Ila's disgust towards her native culture and compares her a street whore whose short hair look like bristles of a toothbrush. Ila and grandmother are two strikingly different diasporic characters; Ila being a cosmopolitan migrant and grandmother, a refugee.

### Conclusion:

The *Shadow Lines* is a beautifully crafted novel which exhibits diasporic dislocation of characters which creates multi-faceted conflicts. This paper focussed on Th'amma and Ila who are shaped into their respective culture are still similar in terms of being different. The *Shadow Lines* which separate people are based on political system but aren't visible to the eyes of people. These lines are one of the major factors that shape a person's identity.

**References:**

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