



BETWEEN BORDERS AND BEING: IDENTITY AND EXISTENCE IN THE SHADOW LINES

“What had seemed yesterday to be a boundary, today no longer existed”- Ghosh

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Abstract : Independence from the political interruption from the west came as a boon to the Indian writers who had just started to pen down their feelings via the colonizers' language. Post-colonial writers, so to say, have actually taken the Indian English Literature from the “England Occupied India” or the British Raj zone. They actually turned out to be the voices of the voiceless by writing their literary pieces with bold voices and much chivalry than one couldn't even imagine of at that point of time. Their writings catered to many nationalistic issues among which diaspora, mass massacre, genocide, migration, conversion, colonizer-colonized, East-West, Oppressed-oppressor were a few of them. Caste, class, creed and religion were also their concern and vividly portrayed as detrimental to the society which is prevalent till date.

IndexTerms - Existentialism, Identity, Identity crisis, Migration, Diaspora, National and Individual Identity

I. INTRODUCTION

The Shadow Lines is one of the most celebrated works of Amitava Ghosh that essentially portrays the partition/ post-partition traumas faced by the netizens from both the sides. The novel is a narrative one, that is, it is having stories within a story, different narrators, different settings and is written in a non-linear mode, meaning, the setting of the novel keeps on changing time and again, with a vast geographical range of Dhaka (Bangladesh), Calcutta (now Kolkata) (India) and London (England). It is amazing that just by Ghosh's selection of cities he made himself much clear as well as he was able to put forward the whole idea of the novel- Dhaka and Calcutta representing the India-Bangladesh Partition and London showing the Western influence, rather the Western hegemony, or the quintessential post-colonial hangover. Another fascinating thing that he does is how appropriate he names the novel-“The Shadow Lines”, the title itself referring to the unreality or the invalidity of the constructs that are oh-so-dear to mankind, such as Nation, Religion, Identity, Existentialism and so on and that too at that point of time when people were dying everywhere and watching their loved ones being killed and dishonored every single day, losing everything that they considered to be theirs till the last minute before this all happened and saw their brother-like neighbors turning into foe in a matter of seconds. Just like the shadows arbitrariness or absurdness, the novels setting and narrator keeps on changing. Its weird that as we delve deeper just into the name of the novel, we understand that such arbitrariness is everywhere, in our nationality, which we tend to be very proud of or our religion, which we are very boastful of, our individual or national identity and overall, the human existence. It's all shown by just the mere name of the novel_ “The Shadow Lines”, which seems to be an abstract construction and yet so powerful to subordinate a whole country as large as ours. The shadowiness of the borders contributes to disturb the society and the people dwelling in both the sides in every way possible. Critics believes that this novel superbly demonstrates the arrival of modernization in India.

II. IDENTITY

The identity of the people could be viewed from two angles, one being cultural or psychological and another one as political or social. Identity is actually a human construct which is as arbitrary, vague and shadowed as the thin lines of borders between two “nations”. A notion added to the national identity could be the oneness, unity, brotherhood of the people of the nation. A political identity, whereas, deals with the recognition of a person relying upon his political views, preferences and inclinations. Likewise, psychological identity plays a vital role in the society. It can be defined as something most integral to a human being, for ex. his/her name, caste, creed, religion, social status and geographical location. If a person's psychological identity is distorted, he might even suffer from serious existential crisis. Layman like us think that the word ‘identity’ is always associated with the idea of name, class, caste, creed, race, family background and so on. Modernists on the other hand absolutely deny any such construct. Hence, we can be very sure of the fact that the whole realm of the understanding of the word ‘identity’ is always debatable. Ghosh deals with post-colonial and partition effects in this novel and the combo together makes it a masterpiece which is so extraordinary that is still celebrated till date. Not only that, Amitava Ghosh does a lot of wordplay and very cleverly makes sure that the readers can pretty well notice the multilayers of the novel regarding the colonization, identity crisis, post-colonial and

post-partition traumas and etc. which are put forward by him in the most simplistic way possible. "People like my grandmother, who have no home but in memory, learn to be very skilled in the art of recollection" (Ghosh, 1988). Ghosh is seen revisiting history, voicing the voiceless and completely nullifying the need of the borders via this novel.

III. INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY

Identity can be relying upon aspects like race, culture, religion and etc. In fact, most of the times we consider these to be the proper meaning of identity. However, it isn't that easy as it looks like. Some believe in individual identity whereas some believe in mass/national identity. A few do not believe in the whole concept at all!

Though we question the very concept of identity every time, still there is no denying the fact that we actually associate one's identity as his/her gender, name, class, caste, religion and geopolitical location to a very large extent. Ghosh very trickily uses these very things causing problems to the characters in this novel.

IV. PROBLEMS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

Ghosh problematizes the whole idea of identity in search of nationalism and vice versa. This novel is the witness of the partition between the two countries, India and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), encouraged by the political bodies from both sides for their personal benefits. With the formation of the new country, many people got their identities changed along with the migration. This new identity started to push back their roots causing a distortion to their own nation and identity both. Amitava Ghosh tried to portray 'a world beyond nations' in this novel, which is ideal for existence for every human being irrespective of caste, creed and religion. A nation without politics and any form of supremacy. It could be said that it was one of his utopian worlds which is much similar to the one which the greatest writer, Tagore showcased in his essay called "Nationalism", a world without borders, discrimination and hatred. This novel question the whole process by which a sense of nationality is developed in any individual. The whole concept of national identity is based on homogenizing or finding something in common with the mass community, which marks why and how they became the part of this community. There has to be we-feeling and an unified goal and ambition to look up to. This is what is going to differentiate an Indian from a British, Bangladeshi or Pakistani. Now, the fact of the matter is that, this very notion of integrity that mankind develop on the basis of their geographical or political construction of the land, shows how deceptive and wrong the whole concept of nationality is.

A question that keeps lingering on the back of our minds now is that is nation really a homogenous entity? Well, the answer to this is strictly a NO. Ghosh wrote this novel after taking inspiration from a lot of real-life events that were taking place at that time. Indira Gandhi's assassination, the inhuman massacre that ran throughout the country or the injustice towards the Sikhs that actually instigated the assassination of Indira Gandhi; all these made Ghosh believe that the idea of a homogenous country is completely bogus. Throughout the novel he keeps on portraying the stressed condition in both the countries and religions, Hindus and Muslims, mobs and riots everywhere. Though he doesn't mention it directly in the novel, but it is again very prominently made understood to the readers via the situations he makes the characters go through on personal and community level. That somehow ends up making the readers uncomfortable in every way possible. Till date, as we witness such injustice happening around us on our own people, whom we tend to marginalize somehow, makes it clear that we are still on the same page, rather in a worst condition. What we don't realize is, if we do not raise our voices against the marginalized ones today, tomorrow we might end up being at the periphery.

Amitava Ghosh constantly shows the idea of borders as illusive, more like an oasis or mirage. This worthless political division was just to show off the superiority over one another and of course some gains on the personal levels, it was elaboratively shown in all the sub plots of the novel. "I understand very well, the old man muttered. I know everything, I understand everything. 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, 1988).

If we go a bit deeper into the text, we can understand very easily that it was just the mirror image in both the sides of the border. People in pain, rugged conditions, dying, killing, sobbing and weeping. As we read the text, we understand how Ghosh uses the narrator's grandmother as a prop to imitate out his thoughts in the later part of the novel. She is portrayed to be a migrant, who shifted to Calcutta (now Kolkata) leaving behind everything when the partition took place and was luckily one of those who survived. The grandmother is a very old schooled character who has suffered from traumas after the partition and yet, identifies herself proudly as an Indian now, because she was now settled on 'this-part' of the divided land. That was all that she needed to recognize herself as an Indian and also make it integral to her existence. However, she had a different idea regarding the borders. Border for her was something that could be tangible and physical. While flying to Dhaka, to revisit her own place, she tries to locate the border which her grandson, our narrator makes fun of. This mockery is Ghosh's direct attack on people who thought it was necessary to part. As we gradually advance through the story, we see how her ideas were shattered knowing that the border is nothing like she had imagined all these days which ended up making her very disappointed. Her years old belief was distorted and she couldn't yet come to terms with the same. She started questioning all the national movements, the reasons for wars and the worth of the lives lost. She starts asking if it was actually worth it all. She doesn't seem to find the answer of the questions as to what was the actual need for the demarcation if it was all similar in both the sides, she started asking, how would someone recognize where a person is from if he travels from Dhaka to Calcutta? Ghosh writes, "I could not persuade her that a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one's imagination." (Ghosh, 1988). She finds the whole idea of partition and borders absolutely vague and the same very things which she was very proud of a while ago, brings her utter disgust!

V. SHADOWINESS OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Ghosh brings out the absurdity and nothingness of the partition between the two countries and claims it to be illogical and non-sensical every now and then. The border between India and Pakistan was the last stealth of the Britishers as the believed in

'Divide and Rule' policy always, whereas, the India-Bangladesh partition was totally a well planned and plotted outcome of the big political heads of the time. Probably they too were so inspired by the Britishers that they chose to walk on the same path that the Britishers showed us, 'Divide and Rule', they created a crack between the Hindu and Muslim communities just to benefit their own selves. What they didn't realize is, they were being the victims of the post-colonization hangover and in a long term was harming their own country and own people! They didn't even bother to care about the lives of so many human beings, let alone their belongings and properties. The border lines are actually the illiberal and whimsical products of the politicians' verdicts which they made to meet their greed. A border can never really draw a line between two societies or communities which has been co-living since time immemorial and now parted on the basis of religion majority. What could be more disgusting than that? Calcutta and Dhaka, shall always be connected because of the language the people speak in both the parts- Bengali. Its next to impossible for a mere line to cease the connection between two communities which share the same mother tongue.

The fact that the people were asked and forced to leave their places, shift to a new place, create a new identity and start from zero again is such a fragile and fickle thing to do, which in turn, indicates how fickle the idea of 'Nation', 'Nationality', 'National Identity', 'Existentialism' and etc is. A border could never bring symmetry in any side, drawn anyhow, anyway. The writer has constantly reminded us that riots and violence cannot help individuals on personal levels, neither on a larger realm, however big the country or state is. He showed that Dhaka and Calcutta are now two individual independent cities, located in two different countries, Bangladesh and India respectively, has their histories entwined with each other and as they say, our presents are formed by our past, these two cities cannot be drifted apart howsoever tried. It will always remain connected by the slightest pretext, the citizens, Bengalis, Durga Pujo, their mother tongue- Bengali, cuisines, culture and so on. Ghosh never ever encourages any such borderline or demarcation that separates a land or nation or divides it in any way. According to him all these are arbitrary, vague, worthless and weird ideologies-call it shadow lines, proposed by a group of individuals in power for their own profit some way or the other and he keeps on throwing light on the same aspect in his novel via all the subplots, narratives and characters.

VI. CONCLUSION

'The Shadow Lines' attempts to create an image of national and international politics which results in such a massacre. He holds out the problems with identity, existentialism, nation, nationality, national identity, discrimination on the basis of caste, creed and religion. He showcases the outcome of the same and its uselessness. That's where Ghosh brings in modernity in his novel, by illustrating on the nothingness of the things happening around. On the other hand, he also shows how India and Bangladesh, rather the cities Calcutta and Dhaka are connected in so many ways, irrespective of everything that both the cities witnessed. They can be termed as the glass image of one another and shall continue to remain this way and can never be separated just by drawing a mere line and naming it BORDER.

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