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## An Analysis of Cultural Identity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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### Abstract

The aim of such a study is to understand some of the various issues regarding our national identity; particularly the identity politics that can fully submerge a colonized individual under its gigantic confusion. The author's humble hope out of such a study is to have an idea of insight into Amitav Ghosh's stance on national identity. Amitav Ghosh protests against the manmade boundaries of nation, cast, creed, and identity in his novel. *The Shadow Lines* (1988) negates the concept of national, social and cultural identities. In the novel, Ghosh gives the message to cast aside cultural, regional, territorial, religious and physical differences aside and join the hands through the bond of humanity. The characters like Tridib, Prince form a true relationship with one another bringing west and east together. This paper seeks to shed light on the formation of cultural identity crises in a transnational space in Amitav Ghosh's novel which chronicles the lives of characters who, after many upheavals, where cross-cultural caste, class, gender, and national collaborations blur all sorts of boundaries and enable the formation of new alliances. The paper tries to unravel how the novel presents the emergence of reconstituted families within contexts of domination and resistance. In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh deals with the issues of identity vs. nationhood, the representation of history and ultimately concludes that all borders are imaginary constraints. He dismantles history, the frontiers of nationality, culture, and language. It is a historical novel that focuses mostly on nationalism, identity and the meaninglessness of partition and the 1964 communal riots which occurred in Calcutta, Dhaka, and Khulna.

**Keywords-** Identity, Nation, Oppression, Culture

In Indian English literature, the question of identity is often entangled with that of alienation. Ghosh in this respect treads a different path. In *the Shadow Lines*, the question of identity is worked through integration rather than alienation. The novel presents characters that are well-entrenched in their surroundings even when they are traveling across cultures. One set of characters in the novel are alienated from their surroundings and they sort of desire that alienation: Nick and Ila; the novel not surprisingly invalidates their position as having no

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positive force in dealing with identity formation. Another set of characters in the novel are the obverse of this. They are deeply rooted in their cultures. They are even chauvinistic about their positions Thamma and Robi; the novel does not find any positive force in their position either. The third set of characters are at once integrated into their environment as well as being open-minded in taking steps towards the others, those who are traveling beyond the shadow lines: Tridib, May and the unnamed narrator. The framework that emerges through these characters in *the Shadow Lines* is one which invalidates both alienation and chauvinism and embraces an inclusive imagination.

Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* can be seen from the postcolonial aspect. The novel has been highly critical of the many issues that are being debated in contemporary India. Here, the author has beautifully interwoven the temporal and spatial dimensions into a personal texture where the unnamed narrator builds his own identity. Ghosh deals with the issues of identity vs. nationhood, the representation of history and ultimately concludes that all borders are imaginary constraints. He dismantles history, the frontiers of nationality, culture, and language. It is a historical novel that focuses mostly on nationalism, identity and the meaninglessness of partition and the 1964 communal riots which occurred in Calcutta, Dhaka, and Khulna.

The unnamed narrator of *The Shadow Lines* comes in contact with different characters, often contradictory versions of cultural identity through the main characters in the novel such as his grandmother, Thamma, his cousin, Ila, his uncles Tridib and Robi. Growing up in an upwardly mobile middle class professional family in Calcutta, the narrator acquires the sensibility of a metropolitan, bi-lingual, English speaking, postcolonial subject; his interaction with his cousin and uncles whose fathers are globe-trotting diplomats, and his own stint in London for research work make his attitude and approach to issues of nation and culture more cosmopolitan. One of the most powerful influences in his life as a child is his grandmother a fiercely independent, militantly nationalist woman. Thamma is an embodiment of the cultural identity constructed by the dominant state ideology, which in turn is propped up by the accepted national historiography. Her austerity and rigid work ethic form an essential part of her idea of the modernity and progress of the country.

The native's desire to own the colonizer's world is often accompanied by disowning the colonized world. To disown India, Ila shocks her people, particularly the grandmother by her western dresses and subsequently, she shocks Robi and the narrator by her uninhibited behavior in a hotel in Calcutta, where she wanted to dance with a stranger. Indian culture comes with flying color through the idea of Robi who was not ready to allow Ila to behave in a Western manner, "You shouldn't have done what you did. You ought to know that; girls don't behave like that here. (*The Shadow Lines*, 88). To answer Ila's Western arrogance, he reminds her that she stands in India where girls have certain boundaries which should not be

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crossed in any way. You can do what you like in England, he said. But here there are certain things you cannot do. That our culture; that's how we live (*The Shadow Lines*, 88).

In this one to one conversation between Robi and Ila, Ila represents the English culture. She behaves as an English girl who is not ready to act under the command of others. On Robi's restriction, she cries out, "Do you see now why I've chosen to live in London? Do you see? It's only because I want to be free" (*The Shadow Lines*, 88).

The *Shadow Lines* shows two types of post-colonial understanding. One is that of higher social elites like Mayadebi and the Shaheb, and second is that of characters like Ila who still live in close contact with the West. They do not have roots in the home country and want to be a part of colonizer's world. Such characters have no desire even to think of the colonized world, they are happily imitating the West. Ila's mother, for instance, sits like Queen Victoria. The grandmother, on the other hand, shows the other side of post-colonial understanding. She is enlightened and self-sufficient and ardently proud of being an Indian. She wants India to forge her own identity. Though she admires the nationalism and patriotism of the English, she feels that it is time for Indian to act and achieve their own identity and not waste time in copying the West.

The novel refers to the blurred lines between nations, land, and families as well as within one's own self-identity. Ghosh depicts the characters of the novel as caught between two worlds. Hence, they struggle to the core to come to terms with both their present as well as their past. Like Gandhi, Ghosh is opposed to the political discourse as well as the haphazard division of land and human communities that are required to form a nation. Ghosh's tale dramatizes the inner conflicts of the juxtaposition of dissimilar yet related cultures as well as the outward conflicts between friends and families that have been inflicted by geopolitical discord.

*The Shadow Lines* spans three generations of the narrator's family spread over Calcutta, Dhaka, London, and his English family friends, the Prices. Written against the backdrop of the civil strife in the post-partition East-Pakistan and riot-hit Calcutta, the narration of the incidents begins in 1939 (the year World War II broke out) and ends in 1964. Robi, one of the narrator's cousins, describes his experiences at the time of acting as a government official:

I'd have to go out and make speeches to my policemen saying: You have to be firm; you have to do your duty. You have to kill whole villagers if necessary – we have nothing against the people, it's the terrorists we want to get, but we have to be willing to pay a price for our own unity and freedom. And I went back home, I would find an anonymous note waiting for me saying: We're going to get you for our freedom. It would be like reading my own speech transcribed on a mirror. (*The Shadow Lines*, 246-247).

The novel also provides an insight into the history of colonization legacies. The death of the main characters at the border is the realistic portrayal of the suffering of the people

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who have to endure the pangs of separation and the aftermath effect of it as they move between the borders of the homeland. Said echoes Ghosh's opinion in "Culture and Imperialism by describing imperialism as an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted and finally brought under control" (4). Another critic Mondal observes the publication of *The Shadow Lines* coincided with an academic interest in the interrogation of nationalism and national identity, which were fast developing into a major concern within post-colonial criticism and post-colonial approach. Ghosh emerged as a unique literary genius, "whose innovative textual experiments offered new insights and openings into the cluster of conceptual and theoretical concepts that had been developed to describe, analyze and interpret the complexity of colonial and post-colonial relations" (164).

Amitav Ghosh asserts that the borders that separate nations are nothing more than artificial lines created by men. Thus, the 'shadow lines' of the title are the borders that divide people, and one of the main emphases of the novel is on the arbitrariness of such cartographic demarcations. Why are these lines shadowy then? Because like shadows, they lack substance, they lack meaning. Ghosh believes that these shadow lines, these meaningless borders, can and should be crossed if not physically, then at least mentally through our imagination and through open-minded acceptance of people, irrespective of nationality, religion or race.

Tridib and the narrator do not believe in the concreteness of borders because they easily cross them with their imagination, bringing together different nations, cultures, and ideas in their mind, the grandmother does firmly believe in these borders. In fact, she believes in them so fervently, perhaps defensively, that she disapproves of Ila, because Ila spent her entire life heedless of these borders, crossing them again and again in her travels to different countries. Ila has no right to live there, she said hoarsely. She doesn't belong there. It took those people a long time to build that country; hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed. Everyone who has lived there has earned his right to be there with blood: with their brother's blood and their father's blood and their son's blood. They know they're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood.

Sadly, most people have similar ideas about borders. These shadow lines are what they try to base their identity on. For them, shadow lines are more than just lines of demarcation, the frontiers constructed by politicians. They are to them the signifying acts that construct notions of discrete identity. The grandmother, too, bases her identity as an Indian, as distinct from a Bangladeshi, on the lines that separate India and Bangladesh. So firmly does she believe in them that she is disappointed with the lack of tangible lines that divide the two countries? Because she derives strength in her patriotism from her belief in these lines and the supposition that her identity is bound with them, her sense of identity is also shaken.

The novel fundamentally portrays the Hindu-Muslim riots caused by Partition and rumors spread thereafter and consequently its evil effects on innumerable innocents. Owing

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to this predicament, the characters are sent to various regions and areas where they are in search of their own identity. This exploration on their part has bestowed general Identity to the present novel. Ultimately, the characters cross their social, cultural, and national boundaries which have given a theme of multi-culturally and diversity to the novel.

Ghosh finds history as an instrument of representation that has been appropriated by the colonialists and nationalists alike to produce totalitarian notions of identity. The historiographical reconstructions in Ghosh's novels are consequently attempted on the part of the author to produce a postcolonial counter-discourse, intended to question the notion of monolithic and exclusionist cultural identity created by the established canonical history. *The Shadow Lines* are separating the individuals and communities from each other. To his critics, Ghosh stands as a typical postcolonial writer who perceives identity as a product of historiographical representation, and whose novels are all re-writing of the Eurocentric history, intended to re-map the world by drawing connections across boundaries (Prasad, 56).

The study has here examined the way of Ghosh's narrative challenges the very discourse of power that legitimizes the idea of a stable, single and pure national identity by writing off the presence of the other from the conceptual frame of nationhood, and in the process captures the experience of nationhood in its heterogeneous complexity. *The Shadow Lines* represents his most direct confrontation with nationalism and national identity and it is simultaneously about each character's personal identity.

In *The Shadow Lines*, Thamma looks to avenge her enemies at any cost for protecting her country from all evils. However, in the end, Thamma is treated as a foreigner in the place of her birth. It is demoralizing for Thamma who considers Dhaka her *desh* or country. Tridib's murder in Dhaka just adds more pain to her woes. Thamma cannot come to terms with the changing political scenario in the post-British era. She is still trapped in her pre-national spatial identity (Anjali, 2003).

She cannot understand why her place of birth has come *to be messily at odds with her nationality* (*The Shadow Lines* 152). Anjali adds,

Thamma's search for the pre-partition Dhaka of her childhood and youth is projected as nostalgia for home. Thamma's attempt to identify herself as a native Dhakaian from the older parts of the city, who is contemptuous of the alien inhabitants of the new residential localities, records her amnesia in relation to her new Indian identity when confronted with more compelling claims of an older solidarity (*The Shadow Lines* 110).

Ghosh's concept of imagined communities in *The Shadow Lines* is very similar to the song sung by Gabriel Farista in *The Satanic Verses* that mimics an old Hindi song: "*Mere juta hai Japani, ye pantaloon inlistani. Sar pe lal topi rusi, phir bhi dil hai Hindustani*". Which is to say, despite japness shoes, English trousers, and Russian hat the traveler still remains an Indian at heart.

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The wars, the riots were all incidents that took place to set people free. Yet Tridib's death had not set any of them free. Divisions of borders and memory do not solve problems. They merely terminate lives and displace our sense of identity. The only way to heal the tragedy is for people like the narrator and May to come together to reconcile with their inner restlessness and settle for a redemptive memory. Nothing and no one would be able to bring Tridib back to life; none would be able to reverse History and make Bengal united again; none could wish and wash the border away. Hence the best possible way to handle the path would be to forgive, justify the blood by calling it a sacrifice, defend the riots as being acts of self-preservation and eventually move on, learning from History, and yet despairing at the possibility of History repeating itself with the same, if not mere intense cruelty.

The first border from which we need to be freed then is not that of a nation but of identity itself and here Edward Said's essay *Freud and the European* provides a fascinating entry. This is primarily a discussion of Freud's late work *Moses and Monotheism*, an attempt to disrupt the status of Moses as the father of Jewish identity by claiming that Moses was actually Egyptian, and had imported monotheism from Pharaonic culture. Freud's intervention is not only an attempt to disrupt the monolithic character of Jewish identity but more importantly to attack the rigid boundaries of identity itself. Said's strategy is to situate Freud's excavation of Jewish identity in the context of present-day Palestine. The investigation of Moses' identity is an exploration of the non-European origin of the Jewish people. Victims of a specifically European anti-Semitism under Hitler, the 'invasion' of Palestine and establishment of a Jewish state nevertheless relied implicitly on the assumption that the Jews were European 'like us' (and hence Britain's support for Zionism and eventually America's unquestioning support for Israel). This maintains an unresolved paradox: if the Jews are dispersed and mistreated because they are foreigners as Freud maintains, they also occupy Palestine as a returning, civilized European population. The issue of Jewish identity under these circumstances is, psychologically, a continual cycle of repression and return.

Ghosh examines identity in the sense of being bound:

I thought of how much they all wanted to be free; how they went mad wanting their freedom; I began to wonder whether it was I that was mad because I was happy to be bound." The narrator stays happy being bound because he knows he "could not live without the clamour of the voices within him (*The Shadow Lines* 88).

In the novel, Ghosh examines identity as the site of multiple and conflicting claims against the idea of a single uniform personal and national identity. Concerned with conflicting voices within, the novel explores the metaphoric boundaries of identity through the relationship between memory and place while retelling national history as a story of borders.

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The author brings forward to us the inhuman consequences of the creation of these shadow lines of demarcation. He reveals through the riots the absurd manner in which your home can suddenly become your enemy when those people who cannot separate their identity from their belief in these borders develop and nurture hatred towards each other.

Thus, the novel implicitly suggests the need for coexistence and strong humanitarian ties across cultures overlooking personal, regional and political considerations. It questions the meaning of political freedom and the force of nationalism in the modern world. It asks a very important, a universal question that what is a nation? What is this great entity that nationalism serves? Does it even exist? Should it exist? And in the answers to these questions lies the key to understanding the novel.

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