

ISSN 2320 - 4494
RNI No. MAHAUL03008/13/1/2012-TC

POWER OF KNOWLEDGE

An International Multilingual Quarterly Refereed Research Journal
Volume : I Special Issue April - 2017



ARTS | COMMERCE | SCIENCE | AGRICULTURE | EDUCATION | MANAGEMENT | MEDICAL |
ENGINEERING & IT | LAW | SOCIAL SCIENCES | PHYSICAL EDUCATION | JOURNALISM | PHARMACY

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Price : Rs. 300/-

Annual Subscription: Rs. 1000/-

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Theme of Partition and Freedom in Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines

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Abstract:- This paper is an attempt to focus on theme of partition and freedom used in literature. Here the novel chosen to deal with the theme is Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. Ghosh is an outstanding writer who authentically deals with the subject of partition and freedom in his writings. I tried to reveal his appreciable genius for dealing with nation, history and patriotism.

Keywords: partition, freedom, violence, Tridib, boundries, borders, Nostalgia

The Shadow Lines (1988) was conferred the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award. The novel reflects Ghosh's own experiences of the riots and mutual hatred and love that people manifested for their fellow human beings during the time of crises. Some of the major communal riots erupted in India during the partition that have resulted into that innumerable innocent people became victims of brutal massacre and huge devastation. Thousands of people became homeless and were forced to migrate to different cities as refugees. The scale of violence, suffering and misery caused by the riots was no less than that could have been caused by a war.

Ghosh has been a witness of the riots took place in Dhaka between Hindus and Muslims in 1964. His family, in fact, fell victim of those riots, and forced to migrate to Colombo. Ghosh was also deeply affected by the anti-Sikh riots erupted in Delhi in 1984. What pained Ghosh deeply was the hatred that he witnessed between the close knit communities of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, who had once been united by a sense of mutual love and brotherhood. These events shaped Ghosh's insight into history, history that uproots people and compels them on an unbearable painful search for meaning of their existence and destiny. Ghosh has presented the faceless and suffering masses figure, also their sorrows, miseries and their disrupted lives.

The novel is divided into two parts 'Going Away' and 'Coming Home' and reflects the issues of up rootedness created by histories, the concept of nationalism, belonging, not belonging, identity, direct impact of communal riots and war on the lives of common people, migration within the country as well as cross cultural migration, man's wanderlust, the peculiar predicament of modern life and so on. Ghosh has taken the issue of migration to unravel the history of the subcontinent that forced people to migrate and seek shelter outside their borderlines. The partition of India resulted into that thousands of people turned refugees who were forced to move as they became victim of religious presentation and racism. The creation of Bangladesh and riots not only rendered people homeless but also made them strangers in their own land.

Tha'mma's family lived in Dhaka before partition. As a college girl, she had witnessed the nationalistic fervour that gripped the entire subcontinent. The political atmosphere in India was ignited with nationalistic zeal. Thousands of young men and women were ready to sacrifice their lives for their motherland. Tha'mma's mind too was fired by the fervent desire of becoming a part of the freedom movement and securing freedom for the nation. In Bengal, the terrorist organizations like 'Anushilan' and 'Jugantar', carried out clandestine activities against the British. Tha'mma was greatly captivated by the heroic tales of the terrorists and hailed Bagha, Jatin and Khudiram Bose as real heroes. She was fascinated by the rebellion. The British Government arrested the rebellion as preventive measures. One of Tha'mma's classmates, a shy, bearded boy was arrested. He, being a part of a terrorist organization was planning to kill the English magistrate

in Khulan district. Years later, Tha'mma narrates that incident to her grandson, and also how she was ready to sacrifice anything for the sake of the important places that the nation occupied her. Narrator asks Tha'mma, 'Do you really mean Tha'mma, I said, and that you would have killed him? (The English Magistrate). Tha'mma replied, 'Yes, I would have killed him. I would have done anything to be free.' It reflects one's inclination to be free or one's quest for freedom. Tha'mma represents all the Indians who pinned for independent India. But Independence, freedom unexpectedly followed by the partition and India had to face the heartbreaking situation. Hopes and dreams of Indians were shattered by the partition of the country. Nationalism as the nation to their dismay had failed to homogenize differences. Tha'mma's motherland Dhaka was separated from India and became a part of new country, Pakistan. Innumerable communities of people rendered homeless and forced to migrate to distant lands as refugees. Ghosh has beautifully portrayed the disintegration of the two families-of Tha'mma and her uncle Jethamoshai who had since generations lived together in their ancestral house. The mounting resentment had estranged the two families and the house was eventually divided into two by a wooden partition wall:

But the building of the wall proved to be far from easy because the two brothers, insisting their rights with a lawyer-like precision, demanded that the division be exact down to the minutest detail. The brothers even partitioned their father's old name plate. It was divided, and their names were inscribed on the two halves-of necessity in letters so tiny that nobody could read them. (TSL, P.123)

The first section of the novel depicts the condition of India after partition and the second section as the title indicated, the returning to own home before partition. The maps and the mirrors that Meenakshi Mukherjee has noted are its central tropes indicate, then, more than the way, 'Identical realities across territorial borders which are originally meant to mark out difference or across communities that are imagined to be different, reiterate the theme of the novel as specified in the title.' Tha'mma's belief in the rhetoric of nationhood builds her faith in the abstract ideas of nation, state, community and geographical boundary. She is not ready to keep pace with the changing realities and shifting boundaries of modern world. For her, these abstract ideas are the most prevalent existing realities because this was the only reality she had lived with all these years. The reality of boundaries had shaped her life, defined her existence and given her distinct sense of identity. But the novelist explodes the myth of geographical boundaries and the futility of wars and violence for the preservation of boundaries. Tha'mma is astonished to know that there is no physical border between India and Dhaka:

And there's no difference both sides will be the same, it will be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all for then -partition and all the killing and everything - if there isn't something in between? (TSL, P.151)

The symbolic description clearly reflects the hatred and enmity between the two communities, Hindus and Muslims that is rooted in the history of partition. When a boundary was drawn between the two nations, it had estranged the relations between the two communities who had lived together since centuries as brothers.

The narrator's grandmother, in her sixties, had crossed over to India during the turbulent period preceding partition. She lived in Calcutta and recollects with a great clarity every minute detail about Dhaka and their life there. Years later, on a visit to Dhaka she could identify each one of those places:

Look Shadow-bazaar, there's the Royal Stationery, do you remember?...it's the same signboard, I remember. That's where the boys used to play football, that's where

Shyam Lahiri used to live, that's Raina's house,...that's where Navesh Babu used to sit...seeping up the gold dust with.... (TSL, P.206)

Nostalgia is an intrinsic part of every outsider. Nostalgia often leads to sense of isolation and alienation and a hankering for the past, for days and places that are no more. Jethamoshai pretends to make Dhaka his home inspite of Partition, the anti-Hindu feeling, the communal tensions:

Poor old man, all by himself, abandoned in that country, surround by.... (TSL, P.136)
Partition had created two countries out of one. It has made Tha'mma an alien in her own native land. In fact where one country ends, another begins and what has this partition achieved can be mind - boggling questions:

But if there aren't trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, what's the different then? And if there is no difference both side will be the same, it'll be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us.... (TSL, P.151)

Most of the people in the world are motivated by the quest for freedom, which is either political or personal. As grandma plans to fly to Dhaka in 1964, she wonders if "She would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane." Her son mocks at her and asks if she thought that, "the border was a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other, like it was in a school atlas." The idea of borders between nations tremendously disturbs grandmother and Jethamoshai. It is very natural for the narrator who is a child of 'independent' India. For him, borders and frontiers confirm political separation as they denote socio-cultural differences across nations:

I believed in the reality of space, I believed that distance separates, that it is a corporeal substance, I believed in the reality of nations and borders. I believed that across the border there existed another reality. The only relationship my vocabulary permitted between those separate realities was war or friendship. (TSL, P.219)

Throughout the novel, possession/dispossession, nearness/distance pervade. The novel presents no difference. Ironically grandmother finds herself as a foreigner even in her own birthplace. Borders seem to be legacy of history which keep on shifting as per politico-military contingencies and become irrelevant in the world of imagination.

Writers like Khushwant Singh and Bapsi Sidhwa have also dealt with the violence and chaos created by riots, but they have limited themselves to the event of Partition. Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* also refers to partition, but this novel chiefly deal with the riots in independent India. Significantly, the writer does not elaborate on the actual event or violence. By means of Tridib's character, Ghosh has projected a true spirit of individual freedom.. Tridib's life and death suggest a possible subversion of such hostile forces. Jealousy alienates and dehumanizes people.

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