

## **Theme of Postcolonial Migration and Quest for Identity in Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines**

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**Abstract:** This paper tries to explore theme of Postcolonial migration and sufferings of marginalized people who have gone through identity crises after partition of India in Amitav Ghosh's Sahitya Akademi award winning English fiction, 'The Shadow Lines'. This article aims to analyse thoughts and suffering of Postcolonial migrated families through the reference of this novel which consists of almost all the Postcolonial elements such as partition, nationalism, quest for homeland, identity crisis, space/Place etc. The plot of the novel consists of all the major Postcolonial issues such as communal violence, migration and displacement, otherness etc. The novel is divided into two parts: "Going Away" and "Coming Home" which clearly shows the post-colonial diasporic feeling of mind. The novel narrates the story of two families, one English and other a Bengali family, that lives in Calcutta but its roots are in Dhaka, the border lines of East-Pakistan (at that time). The Postcolonial thoughts are reflected in the text of novel where the author believes that divisions made by geographical boundaries is only to divide and separate people by uprooting them from their roots. The very title of the novel Suggests the Postcolonial background with its agony of migration.

**Keywords:** Post colonialism, Amitav Ghosh, Nationalism, Migration, Quest for Identity.

### **Introduction**

Amitav Ghosh is one of the most celebrated novel writers writing in English today. His second novel, *The Shadow Lines* (1988), brought him international fame and recognition as a writer and he won the Sahitya Akademi Award in India for his fiction in English. Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta on 11 July, 1956. He was the son of a diplomat, Shailendra Chandra Ghosh and his housewife, Ansali Ghosh. Although his family migrated from Eastern

Bengal to Calcutta before the Partition of India in 1947, the theme of migration has been one of the major themes in his novels mostly found in *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and *The Glass Palace* (2000). His novel, *Sea of Poppies* was shortlisted for Booker Prize. He was the winner of the 54<sup>th</sup> Jnanpith award, India's highest literary honor. His novel, 'The Shadow Lines' focuses light on the communal violence that broke out in some parts of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and, mainly, Calcutta after partition of India. The narrator in *The Shadow Lines* describes different kinds of events that took place in different ways. He relates the two political events, namely, the India Pakistan war of 1962 and the communal riots of 1964. Written in the background of the political upheaval of the post-partition East-Pakistan and riot-hit Calcutta, the story of the novel begins in 1939 (the year of World War II) and ends in 1964.

### **Post colonialism**

Post-colonialism deals with colonization or colonized peoples. It focuses particularly on the literature by the colonizing culture. The colonized people attempt to articulate their identity and reclaim their past in the face of that past's inevitable otherness. It can also deal with the way in which literature in colonizing countries reflects the language, images, scenes, traditions and so forth of colonized countries. The term "post-colonial" is applied to the cultures of colonized countries affected by the imperial process of colonizers or the strategy of western imperialists for cultural domination. The Post colonialism is a complex cultural analysis of period in which the general mood of people is considered in history as shown by ideas, beliefs or the spirit of the time. The postcolonial discourse discusses different aspects of colonialism. The postcolonial identity crisis, marginalized groups, their exploitation and oppression, displacement, otherness, nostalgia, and the loss of language and culture are the major issues related to post colonialism. The novel, *The Shadow Lines*, consists of all the elements of Postcolonial thought and reinterprets the issues of migration and displacement which ruined many families of colonized countries. It presents the story of a Bengali family, that lives in Calcutta(India) but its roots are in Dhaka (East-Pakistan at that time).

### **Migration**

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* presents three generations of an Indian and British family who experience the 1947 partition of India. *The Shadow Lines* follows the partition of India as an extension of the partition of colonized British India that enforces the nationalistic desire of colonized people who are unable to understand their identity in terms of borderliness. The novel follows a nameless narrator who tries to discover the reasons for his cousin Tridib's death by re-imagining the past. However, the past for these characters is a nostalgia of home sickness separated by geographical boundaries. The thoughts of migration is the central theme in this fiction. This novel aims to address this issue in the context of India, but this is stretched beyond India. Because India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh are newfound nationalities that were previously united. Writing about Indian Partition Gyanendra Pandey describes Ghosh's novel as follows: 'What is involved here is more than the drawing

of new lines on a map, the unfurling of new national flags and the installation of new national governments. What we are dealing with is the tearing apart of individuals, families, homes, villages and linguistic and cultural communities that would have been called nationalities; and the gradual realization that this tearing apart was permanent and that it necessitated new borders, communities, identities and histories.’<sup>1</sup>

The novel is divided into two sections: ‘Going Away’ and ‘Coming Home’. The story of the novel, narrated by an anonymous first-person narrator, shifts from London to Calcutta and from Calcutta to Dhaka. The narrator of the novel relates the story of two families, a Bengali family and the other, an English family with the life in Dhaka before Partition, life in London during the World War II and the life, the Narrator lives during the 1960s in Calcutta and 1970s in London. The novel begins in 1939, the year of outbreak of World War II, when Tridib, narrator’s uncle, went to England. Tridib was 8 years of age then and his mother, Mayadebi, Twenty-nine. The narrator recalls his grandmother, Thamma and her younger sister, Mayadebi whose husband was an officer in foreign services. Therefore, they were out of India for most of their time. The narrator was a boy when he first saw Tridib in Calcutta. Tridib used to tell the narrator about his journey experiences to England. Tridib and May Price became friends during their residence in Calcutta. The grandfather of May Price went back to London and In 1939, Tridib also went to England with his father. The narrator was the childhood friend and lover of a girl namely Ila who wants to be free from her cultural roots for the purpose of enjoyment. She did not like to stay in Calcutta and continued to visit many places. Finally, she settled down in London by marrying an English man, Nick.

In the second section of the novel entitled as ‘Coming Home’, the narrator narrates the events after the year 1962. The narrator begins the story with the description of his childhood days spent with his grandmother and mother. Their ancestral house was in Dhaka but after partition of India in 1947, they migrated to Calcutta. After partition, Dhaka became a part of East-Bengal province of Pakistan. So narrator’s grandmother had been disconnected from any news of Jethamoshai and her aunt since 1947. But grandmother was still haunted by memories of her ancestral house in Dhaka. She received an invitation letter from her sister, Mayadebi, to visit their old house located in Dhaka. It would be a coming back to home for her. She booked air ticket to visit Dhaka accompanied by Tridib, May Price and other family members. After reaching Dhaka, they came to know that communal clashes had outbroken in Dhaka and their stay in Dhaka seemed unsafe. On the return journey to Calcutta, Robi, Tridib, May Price, the narrator, Mayadebi and her sister were in the car. The elder sisters were shocked to see that the old man ‘Ukil-babu’ was bed-sticken and sick. Mayadebi addressed him as Jethamoshai. She told him that they had come there with a view to come him back to Calcutta along with them. But he refused to leave the place. The driver of the car came runningly to inform them that they would be in trouble in Dhaka due to Communal violence that had outbroken in the streets of Dhaka. So, they decided to leave the place at once with heavy heart. On seeing this, the old man got up and followed their departed car by

a rickshaw. They saw a mob waiting for the victims along the way. The mob stopped the rickshaw and pulled down the old man for hitting. On seeing this, May Price tried to save the old man and Tridib followed May shouting her to stop. The mob left May Price but Tridib was slain by them. The Car driver saved others by finding a safe corner. May Price met with the narrator after many years in Delhi and described the incident that happened with Tridib. She accused herself to be the cause of Tridib's death. She also considered his death not an accident but a sacrifice.

### **Quest For Identity**

We may therefore read the 1947 Partition as migration of many families from their roots. Further Ghosh implemented the novel to describe the issues of nationality and identity Crises particularly how we think about a nation, how we feel nationalized, and what are our grievances to the nation. This created nationality, through the emergence of boundaries divided the one family into two nationality and their identity is decided by political decisions. In the novel Grandmother has been displaced by the Partition of East Pakistan to Indian Bengal, where she comes back and anticipates to visit her old house which is in East Pakistan (Bangladesh). She fears of complication for going there but at last goes there. During her visit, she asks if she "would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane"<sup>2</sup> This native query highlights the arbitrary thought of dividing land and its people. With the same sentiment grandmother carries her thoughts further by asking: I mean, where is the difference then? And if there's no difference both sides will be the same; it'll be just like it used to be before... What was it all for then-partition and all the killing and everything-if there isn't something in between?<sup>3</sup>

That other thing which may be interpreted as the mysterious relationship between two marginalized families which is an outcome of borders, that we understand our relationship to the world in terms of geographic boundaries, decided by political outlines. Therefore, The Shadow Lines point out that maps create borders that confines geographical and ideological limits on humanity.

### **Conclusion**

If the immigrants willingly leave their homeland to be settled in a foreign land, there are more chances of them to be settled there in comparison to the situation in which circumstances force them to leave their own homeland which has become a foreign land as a result of partition after independence from a foreign rule. The same situation is faced by the narrator's grandmother, Thamma who has been uprooted from her roots due to partition. She has been forced or involuntarily migrated to host land (Calcutta). Her dream of family reunion is left unfulfilled due to border lines (as illusionary shadow lines) drawn cross the two lands in the name of nationalism. The emigrants think of being rootless as they face the misrepresented identities made by partition. They tend to develop a paradigm shift in understanding the national identity. Ghosh represents numerous themes of identity crisis caused by migration from his novels. Whilst dealing with themes of identity complexity, he

tries to represent that these mistaken identities are outcomes of partitions and new geographical boundaries etched by political leaders. These boundary lines can't separate the hearts of people, their thoughts and emotions concerned with both sides of lines. Amitav Ghosh advocates the need to cross these boundary lines so that the whole world will become a home for mankind apart from different national identities. It would be a final remedy for the current sufferings of mankind. After a lot of consideration, the conclusion emerges that Amitav Ghosh represents the theme of migration and quest for identity in his masterpiece novel, 'The Shadow Lines'. It is a realistic picture of cross-border migration and quest for identity. The illusionary line of border that separates the two nations is just like a shadow line. The Shadow Lines present the difficult situations and crises that human identities are facing due to partition and human migration.

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