

Search for the Structured Ambit in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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One of the earliest uses of diaspora is found in the Bible to describe Jews exiled from Israel by the Babylonians. In the contemporary world, it connotes a group of people with a similar heritage or homeland living in another country. The reason of this migration can be political such as war or economic such as job opportunities. Migration of people has been taking place for centuries and almost all modern civilizations have been created through these mass movements. Distances have shrunk and we are living in a global village which allows easier transition geographically but the emotional, social and psychological trauma of migration remains unchanged. Migration is an important theme in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* presenting the conflict between the personal and political; entangling the participants in a web of lines drawn on the land and on the psyche caused by the partition of the India. Edward Said observes on this phenomenon of political migration (1993, 402):

[I]t is one of the unhappiest characteristics of the age to have produced more refugees, migrants, displaced persons, and exiles than ever before in history, most of them as an accompaniment to and, ironically enough, as afterthoughts of great post-colonial and imperial conflicts. As the struggle for independence produced new states and new boundaries, it also produced homeless wanderers, nomads, vagrants, unassimilated to the emerging structures of institutional power, rejected by the established order... And in so far as these people exist between the old and the new, between the old empire and the new state, their condition articulates the tensions, irresolutions, and contradictions in the overlapping territories shown on the cultural map of imperialism.

This quotation is especially relevant to the political upheavals in the Indian subcontinent by the departing imperialistic agency. In the novel *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh constructs a complex network of human relations across national boundaries exposing the futility of the cartographic exercise to contain explosive emotions in a spatiotemporal framework. It is a narrative comprising of the memories reposed in the unnamed narrator; whose sensitive and understanding personality makes him the trusty keeper of moments lived by various characters. Amitav Ghosh uses two female characters namely Thakuma and Ila to show the problematic experiences of migration. Their lives are juxtaposed and their intersections illustrates two completely divergent ideologies and worldviews while having some uncanny similarities. To begin with, both are very close to the narrator: one is his grandmother, the other is his cousin. He is aptly positioned to voice their insecurities. Interestingly, it is a kind of triangle held together by the narrator as both these women almost hate each other.

Thakuma born in Dhaka in pre-independence India, married and widowed has lived most of her adult life in Calcutta where she worked in a school bringing up her son. The narrator is her grandson, who has grown up watching her as a strict school mistress even at home. After her retirement, she tells the narrator about her home in Dhaka, where she used to live with her parents and extended family. She narrates an incident from her college days when one of their classmates was arrested by the British Police for involvement in terrorist activities. Thakuma says that she would have accompanied him if only she knew that he was a freedom fighter. She expresses her resolve to kill an English Magistrate; "Yes, I would have killed him. It was for our freedom. I would have done anything to be free" (Ghosh, 1995, p.39). While Thakuma's quest is for a political freedom, Ila is searching for a more personal idea of freedom. She declares, after a fight with the narrator and her uncle Robi, "Do you see now why I've chosen to live in London? Do you see? It's only because I want to be free" (Ghosh, 1995, 88). Ila's spirited

declaration of freedom comes when she is stopped from dancing with strangers in a Calcutta bar by her uncle. Like Thakuma, the character of Ila, too, must negotiate to find or create her own freedom. Although she leads an independent life in London, and makes her own rules, away from the restrictions of middle-class Bengali life in Calcutta, Ila is inextricably trapped between the two cultures. The novel focuses on Ila's anxieties about being rejected by the western culture that she strives to embrace while she, at the same time, consciously rejects her native Bengali culture. Said's definition of exiles as being located between cultures and nations, as belonging to 'both worlds without being completely of either one or the other (1993, xxx) seems very apt in her case.

Interestingly, both these women migrate in the quest for their idea of freedom but both feel cheated and disillusioned. Ila discovers that her husband is cheating her and she cannot break away from the shackles of genteel domestic sham in spite of being a free woman in London. Thakuma also learns woefully that her beloved freedom comes at a heavy price of partition making her a foreigner in her native Dhaka claiming the lives of her uncle and nephew in a single stroke. Both these women seem at the opposite ends of a spectrum of nationalistic ideology. While Ila is a global citizen who views the world as homogenized versions of airport lounges, Thakuma is a staunch believer who thinks boundaries are made out of the blood which is needed to be shed in this endeavour. She declares with utmost conviction, "They know they're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood" (Ghosh, 1995, p.78). Benedict Anderson observes, "the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (2006, p.7). She feels exasperated when she is planning to travel to Dhaka and realizes that the border is not drawn on the ground as she expected, "What was it all for then - partition and all the killing and everything - if there isn't something in between" (Ghosh, 1995, 151). Anderson defined a nation as "an imagined political community -

and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (2006, 6) which is exactly how Amitav Ghosh describes Thakuma and "her invented Country" (1995, 137). Even after the tragic death of her nephew and uncle in Dhaka, she doesn't see the dangerous dimension of her nationalist ideology. This is demonstrated in her act of donating her gold chain, the only ornament she has from her husband which she refused to remove even during a surgery, to the fund for war, "for your freedom, we have to kill them before they kill us" (Ghosh, 1995, 237). The very people who were her allies against the British have now become enemies. Nations are not fixed entities as is evident in the case of Indian subcontinent where two nations were carved out in a surgical fashion to be followed by the creation of another nation in a matter of a few decades. This is a warning against treating national cultures as absolutes. Nations and cultures appear to be dynamic entities created by their shared histories and evolving organically with time. Thakuma is perplexed as "her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality" (Ghosh, 1995, 152) because of the changing identity of the nation she believes she belongs to rightfully.

Another important phenomenon in migration is fabrication - making stories to remember and recreate what has been left behind. Fabrication also helps in coping with the new worldview the diaspora is confronted with. In the novel, Thakuma as a young child, who is denied entry to her uncle's side of the house after the two brothers partition the house creates fantastic stories about "that" side - calling it the "upside down house" to entertain or intimidate her younger sister depending on the need of the moment. In these stories, the familiar day to day life in her uncle's side of the house becomes so distorted as if the wall dividing the house has magically transformed them into some kind of aliens. This unseen other half of the house becomes a source of endless fascination for the two girls and illustrates the fundamental principle of binary division; while Thakuma's side of the house represents normalcy, her uncle's house represents an inversion of normalcy: "The strange thing was that as we grow older even

I almost came to believe in our story” (Ghosh, 1995, 126). Years later, when she actually gets to visit her uncle's house she realizes that it is no more different or alien than hers. With this, Ghosh deconstructs the key separatist assumption underpinning nationalist discourse; the political logic that borders mark out actual and unambiguous differences. Thakuma's nationalist faith in the special enchantment in lines seems to stem from her memory of the partitioning of her family house in Dhaka. In fact, the Dhaka house becomes a metaphor through which Ghosh articulates his ideas about spatial divisions. The arbitrariness of such a partition is emphasized when the wall that is erected to divide the house “ploughed right through a couple of door-ways so that no one could get through them anymore” (Ghosh, 1995, 123). This ominously hints at the closure of any communication which creates fear and fabrication. The arbitrariness in the partitioning of the Bose family house in Dhaka functions as an allegory of the political act of nation formation which was done with a similar disregard.

A similar fabrication is seen in the case of Ila, who is always making up stories about her amazing life in whatever country she currently lives in as her diplomat father moves across the globe. She claims to be in the thick of all the interesting events and people; showing off the colorful year books from the schools she attended. However, she would be absent from most photographs until the narrator catches a glimpse of her in the edge of back row clutching her books while her so called boyfriend is in the foreground. The narrator realizes that she was actually not so different from him and bore the burden of middleclass insistence on educational excellence in their children. Ila's boastful nature, when visiting India, may be read as a coping mechanism to forget the angst of being the other. Being a diaspora is not an easy feat for a child as one is physically distinct and not easily accepted making her a lonely and sad person. There is a pressure to gel in the crowd to avoid being conspicuous. This alienation is most poignantly described in the bullying that Ila suffers as a small child in London made worse by the fact that Nick Price, studying in the same school, didn't stand up for her as

he was ashamed of her. Ila later fabricates a story out of this racist bullying episode while playing houses with the narrator but breaks down in tears. Interestingly, she transforms herself into Magda, the English doll with blue eyes and blonde hair showing her desire to look like everyone around her as she knows that she gets targeted because of the color of her skin and hair. The detailed and vivid description of her trauma shows the vulnerable side of the diaspora generation growing up in a hostile environment. The fact that Ila can share this only under the veil of a story illustrates the immense pressure these people feel to project an image of successful wellbeing especially in front of their families that have been abandoned for the sake of greener grass. The narrator learns about the real sequence of events from May three years later and understands her trauma, "Ila, the sophisticate, who could tell us stories about smart girls and rich boys in far-away countries... walking alone because Nick Price was ashamed to be seen by his friends, walking home with an Indian" (Ghosh, 1995, 76).

Sadly, the same story is repeated years later when Ila is cheated by Nick, now her husband and financially dependent on her and her parents. After confiding about it once to the narrator, she later tries to tone it down saying she made it up. When the narrator taunts her about her moral standards, she says, "I only talked like that to shock you, and because you seemed to expect it of me somehow. I never did any of those things. I'm about as chaste, in my own way, as any woman you'll ever meet" (Ghosh, 1995, 188). This outburst conclusively describes her angst and she seems to represent the diaspora generations: trying to balance the two worlds they are burdened with as observed famously by Salman Rushdie, "We are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions. Partial beings, in all the sense of that phrase ...Our identity is at once plural and partial... Sometimes, we feel we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools" (1992, p.12, 15). The journey of the diaspora in an alien land can't be summed up in better words. There is always a lingering pair about the cushioned comfort of the familiar world which has

been left behind, in this case consciously as a matter of choice, which builds up the pressure to present the new homeland in rosy hues. Ila is a prototype of all the people, especially women, who are trying to eke out an identity and life of freedom which they think is denied in India. Yet, she cannot get rid of the age-old psyche of preserving the front of a happy marriage. When the narrator suggests that she should leave Nick for his infidelity she refuses may be due to the cultural baggage she is weighed down with. Homi Bhabha observes (1994, p.172):

Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational. It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement...The transnational dimension of cultural transformation - migration, diaspora, displacement, relocation makes the process of cultural translation a complex form of signification.

Ila imagined that her rejection of Indian cultural ethos and relocation to her land of promised freedom would mean ensure happiness. Yet, she remains an outsider. She does not want to accept the reality being slapped in her face. She is still the 10 years old Ila who loves to play houses. The fabrication is what lets her survive her trauma - making up stories to construct a counter narrative of the disturbing episodes in her life, very much like Thakuma who makes up stories about the upside-down house to cope up with the trauma of loss of her cousins, her playmates and her spatial freedom. The remedy for the pain and trauma available to the Diaspora is to cheat themselves in to believing that they belong in their new homes and forgetting their difference. This is evident in the desperate urge to assimilate in to the host culture. Ila shows this urge when she recreates herself as Magda. But her imagination does not change the perception of others. Even after growing up she chooses to continue this strategy of assimilation. The novel describes her politically opinionated flat mates who, "seemed to regard her as a kind of guest, a decoration almost", calling her, "our own upper-class Asian Marxist" (Ghosh, 1995, p.97). The narrator can see that they have already made

their decisions when they make a sham of asking her opinion but Ila is happy in her fabricated world participating in the protests for political agendas she clearly doesn't understand. Her most desperate attempt at assimilation is her marriage with Nick. In a way, the childhood wrong of deserting her is undone when Nick marries her. But it is a marriage of convenience for Nick who has obviously married Ila for money and the financial support coming from her family. They live in a flat bought by Ila's father dependent on the money Ila earns as Nick is not working. And yet, he cheats on her not even attempting to hide it. She is devastated by the "discovery that the squalor of the genteel little lives she had so much despised, was a part too of the free world she had tried to build for herself" (Ghosh, 1995, p.188).

This is the tragic condition of the Diaspora that they remain on the fringes though desperately trying to be part of the mainstream. They are constantly reminded of their difference and they are doomed to live the double lives - an expatriate in their native country and a non-native in the country where they arrive with aspirations and expectations. This dubious double citizenship is the root cause of the identity crisis faced by them. They do not conform to any of the available structures of social discourse and exist on the sidelines everywhere. This is the predicament they have to accept because of their choice of migrating to the modern version of the Promised Land.

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