

The Theme of Freedom and Violence in The Shadow Lines by Amitav Ghosh

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Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* has woven fact and fiction in a complex, absorbing narrative that mirrors lives across nations and spans almost half a century of recent Indian history. The reader looks at love and loyalty and examines the questions of fidelity and accountability, of tradition and modernity, of freedom and its evanescent quality.

The Shadow Lines, Ghosh had described the recent events in the country – the terrorist attacks, the caste riots, the shootings in Kashmir – as ‘lurid hallucinations.’ Most Indians and foreigners would consider these happenings as ‘an endemic disease, a plague peculiar to the subcontinent.

According a gendered narrative of displacement and dispossession, of large-scale and widespread communal violence, and of the realignment of family, community and national identities as people were forced to accommodate the dramatically altered reality that now prevailed.

Ghosh’s novel incorporates all these traumas. Tha’mma, the narrator’s grandmother, born and brought up in Dhaka, has to accept the grim reality that after 1947, Dhaka is no longer her home. She might have well asked, ‘Who am I? Am I an Indian merely because I am a Hindu and live in Calcutta? Given a choice, she would rather have stayed on in Dhaka. In Calcutta, where she settles down after the sudden death of her husband, she lives in the less-affluent locality of Bhowanipore. Dhaka would remain a ‘home’ only her memory, a ‘home’ that she could not go to.

Ghosh explores the concept and meaning of freedom and identity, themes very crucial to the modern man. Political freedom was a momentous event that happened in 1947 when India became independent. Equality and freedom were granted to all the citizens of this country, irrespective of caste, creed or sex. By liberating themselves of the shackles of the British Empire, people thought, that they had achieved something very precious, which the Empire had denied them– the freedom of the individual.

Once this freedom was legally granted to them, it became evident that while it was easy to enact a law, it was very difficult to actually experience this freedom because of the complex and contradictory forces inherent in the Indian society. These forces are difficult to restrain or contain in the existing circumstances and they have introduced the divisive tendencies that tear the country apart. But what is freedom for one may be enslavement for another. The political freedom of 1947 may mean nothing go her/him who sees herself/himself now under another yoke, where earlier it had been a foreign one. One is almost forced to ask: can one really be free, personally, socially or politically?

The women characters in the novel– Tha’mma, Ila and May– from different cultures and generations, provide an apt study of this dilemma. Each has an incomplete understanding o the true nature of freedom. It is the narrator’s point of view that is paramount. He interacts with each one of them and we get to know of their limited vision and their idiosyncrasies and foibles by watching them through his eyes. In the process, the theme of freedom is explored, developed and assessed.

Freedom means different things to the different characters, depending on the state they occupy in the backdrop of recent Indian history. Tha'mma had been a young girl in Dhaka when the freedom struggle had reached its peak. Later she had witnessed and birth of two new nations, experienced the pain associated with the partition of the land, and participated in the new order and the new political system that evolved out of that experience.

To Ila, two generations later, the spirit of nationalism that had inspired Tha'mma, is a thing of the past. She is a post-partition child. She is unable to conform or adapt to the society that has developed in independent India and escapes to another society with a different set of values, a different social system. For each one of them, namely, Tha'mma and Ila, the concept of freedom has been moulded by their own individual experience and the different worlds that they inhabit.

However, the freedom won in 1947 did not create that perfect order that Tha'mma had hoped for. In fact, the political freedom won by nation had created grounds for animosity and hatred by drawing up superfluous lines, demarcating nations and boundaries. Curiously, she was an Indian national, but her place of birth was Dhaka. Her distress and disillusionment is evident when she has to fill up the disembarkation card before landing at Dhaka airport and she is not 'able to quite understand how her place of birth and come to be so messily at odds with her nationality' (152).

Ila is an enigmatic character. She tries to be free and feels that Indian milieu is alien to her. Unfortunately, so is the other world that she has adopted as her own, where she believes she can be free. She tries her best to be accepted by the people of her adopted land, but her experience tells her that she will never be completely accepted by them. As a child she had attended various schools in different countries but in the group photograph of her class she figures as standing apart, not quite one of the group. However, she tries to convince the narrator that she was popular and accepted by her group. She is a victim a racism in the International school in England and suffers, physically and emotionally, as her classmates reject her. Naturally, she feels isolated, alone and miserable.

Ila is unwilling to accept India as her home, as she has never really lived there and cannot identity herself with its culture. She also knows that her adopted country is not keen to accept her. She is an alien, an outsider and the desire for acceptance produces tension in her. Eventually, in her effort to establish her roots in the West, she marries Nick, an Englishman. He is disloyal to her soon after, yet much against her wish, she decides to shrug off his waywardness and stay in England and continue to be his wife.

Ghosh does not project a society as superior to another society. What he does highlight, however, is the problem of freedom for the modern man. Ila's fight is against the traditions and restraints of a traditional society. She feels she would gain freedom and identity if she combats such forms of power. She fails to realize that the old forms of restraint are being replaced by new form of restraint, which warp one's personality. The sanctity of the man-woman relationship in a marriage is essential to the old order. In the pursuit of new kind of freedom— one that would enable her to realize her true self, Ila is confronted with a different set of problems: the absence of fidelity and trust in her marriage.

Tridib had talked of going 'to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror' (29). This is a transcendental view, which closes the gap between imagination and reality. Only such a man reaches forth to others.

It is tragic that Tridib could realize his dream only in death. He tries to save a helpless old man from being attacked by a frenzied mob. He must have known in that movement that he was not

going to come back alive. But it was in that moment when the border between 'oneself and one's image in the mirror' had ceased to exist for him. It was his final redemption.

Ghosh probes the various facets of violence and how it masquerades as freedom. Violence runs as an undercurrent throughout the novel, as Ghosh investigates the complex connection between freedom and violence in our lives. Can one really be free? Does one have to kill to get freedom or to preserve it? How does violence enter our lives? Can there be violence, on the psychological level, even when there is no physical abuse, in a relationship between a man and a woman? These questions need to be answered.

Through Ila, Ghosh explores two kinds of violence. In peacetime England, an English girl attacks Ila after schools hours. No one from her school comes to her rescue, and Nick rushes home early that day to avoid being seen in her company. Ila's knowledge of the English language is superior to that of the native schoolgirl's English. 'Well' Denise, perhaps you ought to take English lessons from her, even though it's your own language, not hers' (74), the teacher her remarked, when Denise was unable to write a simple sentence correctly. There are undertones of envy, racial hatred and the fear of the ascendancy of the 'other' in the attack that follows.

While exploring the genesis of violence on the social level, Ghosh reveals that sometimes, the seeds of discord are sown, unconsciously, in the minds of the children by the parents themselves. In early January 1964, when the narrator as a young boy catches the bus to school, he notices that there were only a few boys, all sitting huddled together at the back of the bus. In a 'tearful, sing-song sound' (which the narrator can 'still remember' as an adult), a boy tells him that his mother did not let him drink any water that morning because she had 'heard that they had poured poison into Tala tank, that the whole of Calcutta's water supply was poisoned' (199). There was no need to ask any questions. All the children knew who 'they' were. 'It was a reality that existed only in the saying, so when you heard it said, it did not matter whether you believed it or not [...] it only mattered that it had been said at all' (200).

The narrator is then accused of being a friend of the 'enemy'. His friend Montu is a Muslim. He saves his skin by lying. 'I haven't met Montu for months' (200) and he is once again included as being 'one of us..' A hollow relief follows denial and betrayal. 'I was very glad he hadn't come,' (200) says that narrator, spared as he is of any further embarrassment. As lines are drawn up to divide the society or purely religious lines, it is but natural that distrust, dissension and violence should vitiate the environment. There is no realization on the part of the narrator that he had betrayed his friend, no feeling of guilt, only relief that he belonged to the majority community. Just as, perhaps, Nick had felt when he ran home from school knowing that Ila would be attacked by a fellow English girl, he did not want to get embroiled in the quarrel, or even get noticed in her company.

The children are caught in the middle of a communal violence on their way home from school. Ghosh does not describe the scene outside the school like a voyeur (the shops were shut, the streets were empty, the policemen were patrolling the streets) but to bring home the utter senselessness, the sheer insanity of mob fury. A group of boys on Park Street start racing after the bus. The children duck under their seats as stones are pelted against the windows. The bus picks up speed and leaves the attackers behind. 'When we got up and looked back, some of them were laughing, with their arms around each other's shoulders' (203).

Imagine there's no countries

It isn't hard to do

Nothing to kill or die for

And no religion too.

Imagine all the people

Living life in peace [...]

Imagine no possessions

I wonder if you can

No need for greed or hunger

A brotherhood of man

Imagine all the people

Sharing all the world [...]

The rescue mission turns tragic as Khalil, Jethamoshai and Tridib are killed by a frenzied mob. The shadow of this tragedy casts a gloom on all the characters in the novel for the rest of their lives. Robi, who was always keen to know what 'trouble' means, now finds himself troubled. He experiences a nightmare periodically. And May remains haunted by her earlier utterance: 'Can't you ever do anything?'

Conclusion :

The novel shows how futile it is to draw lines and to expect people to stay within neatly drawn religious boundaries; and it shows that there is a thin line between life and death, unless we value life and care. The novel raises many political and ethical questions but over and above, there is hope. The tenderness and concern that the narrator feels for Tridib, Ila and his grandmother; the strength of the narrator's mother and her loving and caring attitude, the bonding and the affection between the Prices and the Datta-Chaudhris – these vignettes of hope and love endure throughout the novel.

References :

1. Meenakshi Mukherjee, "Of Love, War and Empire," The Hindu, October 1, 2000.
2. Amitav Ghosh, "India's Search for Identity," Times of India, Sunday, December 30, 1990: 11.
3. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, "Recovery, Rupture, Resistance; Indian Political Weekly, 28, no. 17 (April 24, 1993): ws2.
4. Amitav Ghosh, The Shadow Lines (OUP, 1998).
5. For example, Santi and Suniti, two schoolgirls from Comilla, shot Magistrate Stevens to death in December 1931. In February 1932, Bina Das attempted to shoot the Governor of Bengal at the Calcutta University Convocation. In September 1932, Pritilata Waddadar, a Chittagong schoolteacher led fifteen men in a raid on the Chittagong Club. After injuring at least ten persons and killing one elderly European woman, Pritilata swallowed poison and died near the club.

Water

I am Pure Water
I am odour less
I am taste less
I am colour less
There are so many less
But they don't make mess
I am trans-parent
Everything becomes apparent
Everything seems to me clear
Everybody is quite dear
Everyone comes with a pinch of colour
It pollutes me and gives an odour
It changes my taste
Stop! You seem to be in haste
It is a shame
You are misusing my name
To make the nation strong
Don't do any wrong
Let me be pure
You will listen, I am sure
Because, I am pure water
Odour less, Taste less and Colour less