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THE ILLUMINATED LINES IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES*

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Abstract: The lines that create new states and separate people based on their religious, cultural, and political beliefs are real and can reshape the identity they bear. People living in a new territory with a new national identity can only dive into the memory to have a glimpse of the days gone by. There is no way to think that the separating lines are obscure and that people can cross the lines with ease. In *The Shadow Lines* the narrator's grandmother, who was born and raised in Dhaka and now is a citizen of India, tries to cross the lines but fails. She has to pay heavily for her attempt. Her traumatic experience and adopted nationalism along with the line of geo-political divide are the direct consequences of the shadow lines drawn ironically. *The Shadow Lines,* in fact, presents the existence of clearly discernable lines at more than one level. Apart from the political lines (borders) between two nations, there are lines across religion, culture, and ethnicity. No such lines are shadowy rather vivid. Therefore, *The Shadow Lines* presents multiple layers of bold lines, which are shadowy only apparently. On each side of the lines there exist a different truth and a different reality.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, illuminated lines

Introduction

Lines separate people and define their identity at more than one level: political, cultural, and religious. All these identity-forming lines operate openly in people's lives like the border markers on a map. In addition, these demarcation lines shape one's nationality. Once people commit themselves to a particular side of a line—either willingly or forcedly—their fate is sealed forever. To be specific, they cannot return to their original home, or they cannot claim it to be their home any longer as if "they are put outdoors" (Morrison, 1979). There is no shadow in such lines, rather these lines are illumined with multiple meanings. Almost all the characters in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* experience these lines not in the form of shadows but in the form of real lines. The traumatic experience, conflicting identity, and the changed nationalism of the narrator's grandmother are the consequences of the partition. The terrible murder of Tridib is an aftermath of the separation. All the characters in the novel realize that they are encircled by several bright and permanent—albeit shadowy—lines, which they can erase neither from their memories nor from lives. They are compelled to posit themselves either on this or that side of the line. The aim of this article is to reconsider the nature of these lines in *The Shadow Lines* to see how these shadow lines are illuminated.

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Absence of shadow in the political lines

Among the characters, the narrator's grandmother experiences the effect of the partition extremely. The event defines her identity; it has an endless influence on her life. She realizes that the border controls her life, as it controls the lives of thousands of other people. Before visiting Dhaka, her ancestral home, she asks her son about the way of recognizing the demarcation line between these two nations. She believes that there might be a bold line, as on a map, to demarcating the countries. In her view, "if there's no difference, both sides 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" (Ghosh, 1999).

She is astonished at the absence of any vivid line. She questions, "[w]hat was it all for then—partition and all the killing and everything—if there isn't something in between" (Ghosh, 1999)? She thought that the lines would be as vivid as they are on a map. One may not however always distinguish the lineless borders, one can realize the well-built existence of the bright boundary. The borders are at times imaginary, yet they are never shadowy.

The partition makes the grandmother's position much unstable. It makes her hesitant; the notion of her nationality and the notion of her home are pitted against each other. Gradually, the confusion fades away and an eternal conflict grows in her mind. Her once loved home becomes so unfriendly that she is a stranger to it. Indeed, she can hardly call the land her home where she passed her early childhood.

The grandmother cherishes nationalism. Her nationalism is anti-imperialist in nature. She nourishes a desire to take part in the anti-British militant movement. She hopes to be recruited in the terrorist outfits like Jugantar and Anushilan to secure freedom from the colonizers. However, the separation of the nations does not give her the chance to fulfill her long cherished ideal. Though the nations are independent, the lines create a never-ending animosity and hatred among the peoples. The deaths of her two family members cause a sharp change in her nationalistic belief. Her enthusiasm disappears when she experiences the terrible murders. The nationalist spirit that she possessed to see an independent united subcontinent, now changes into seeing India as a separate country. During the 1965 War between India and Pakistan, she donated her precious necklace, the maiden gift from her husband that she has never parted with for the last thirty-two years. She believes that the likes of her ought to make a sacrifice for preserving the nation's freedom. She now treats the people from the other side of the border as enemies, and a deep sense of hatred has grown in her mind for the land, which was once her dearly loved home. The far-reaching change in her nationalism is an aftermath of the precarious lines drawn by the politicians. This is for the changed attitude that Ila calls her a "warmongering fascist" (Ghosh, 1999). What is important to notice is the change caused by the creation of binary opposition—"us" and "them" (Neogy, 2013). The grandmother now treats the citizens of her ancestral homeland as "them". It is, in fact, the drawing of borders—and their aftermath—that changes her nationalist ideology, and once changed, it is changed forever. Suvir Kaul argues that the grandmother is unsuccessful in holding the nationalist faith because "she comes to realize that the borders have a tenuous existence, and that not even a history of bloodshed can make them real and impermeable" (Kaul, 1999). This article offers an antithesis to Kaul's arguing that the grandmother's nationalist devotion does not

run out, rather it firmly survives—though in a changed form, because the borders are a reality. She rightly hopes to see the physical borders—at least trenches or something similar.

The deep mark of separation does not fade away— from either a family or a country. During the grandmother's childhood, they built a wooden partition in her ancestral home. They were so acute and hateful that they even divided a nameplate or an old commode. This hatred remains after decades. The grandmother visits her homestead in Dhaka, and finds that her *Jethamoshai*—though lost his memory—nurtures a deep-rooted abhorrence in his mind. Hearing of them, he instantly exclaims with joy—thinking them dead. He describes them contemptibly that "they [his brother and sister in law] had two daughters: one with a face like a vulture, and another one who was as poisonous as a cobra" (Ghosh, 1999). The two families have been enemies for all these years, and this will continue until death. The readers notice an irony in the enmity. While the grandmother along with her sister and Tridib has come to fetch her old uncle to India, and therefore to rescue him, he—in contrast—shows the firmly established grudge against them. Once a clear line is drawn—not only in the house but also in the psyche—nobody can undo the line.

The grandmother recovers her feelings for her parental home after her retirement. This feeling has remained latent in her psyche for a long time. Until then she firmly believes that "it is everyone's duty to forget the past and look ahead and get on with building the future" (Ghosh, 1999). She never likes to be nostalgic and considers it weakness. On the contrary, after her retirement, she displays her interest for the old Dhaka home. Later she realizes that the displaced people do not have any home of their own because one "can't go home again" (qtd. in Rubenstein, 2001). Her situation is like what Toni Morrison calls "being put *out*", that is to say, to "go somewhere else" (Morrison, 1979). She cannot recognize her home when she re-visits Dhaka. The area that was known to her as Dhaka has been changed and therefore she fails to realize that Dhaka is no longer confined to the contiguous area of her house. Now she does not have any hold on her house because she no longer belongs to Dhaka; she is a superfluous person here and pays a huge penalty for visiting Dhaka—by losing Tridib and the uncle. She now perfectly realizes that once the borders are drawn, and the people are divided, the home exists only in one's memory. She was born in Dhaka, and is "separated from her birthplace by a history of bloodshed and lines on a map" (Kaul, 1999). She loses her sanity when she thinks that the idea of her home and nationality is in conflict. This psychological conflict caused by the partition causes her trauma. In the midst of such suffocating atmosphere she is utterly confused and cannot see the "difference between coming and going" (Ghosh, 1999). Instead of saying going home, she uses the phrase—coming home to Dhaka.

The memories of violence and bloodshed are not remembered; rather these are avoided. "They are repressed" as Kaul argues; "because the modern public sphere has no use for disruptive evidence of its inability to fully transform 'people', with their local and transnational identification and communities, into disciplined citizens who identify solely with the protocols of the nation-states" (Kaul, 1999). People also do not talk about the distressing memories of the 1964 riot. Even the narrator has to dig into the memory to re-live that very incident with the help of newspapers. It has disappeared from the public life as soon as it was over. The narrator asserts the strength of silence; "so complete is this silence

that it actually took me *fifteen years* to discover that there was a connection between my nightmare bus ride back from school, and the events that befell Tridib and the others in Dhaka" (Ghosh, 1999). Kaul mentions that *The Shadow Lines* is "an archaeology of silences" (Kaul, 1999) and the repeated visit of the silence makes the memory more sensitive and hence traumatic. Apart from the grandmother, the narrator, Robi, and May Price, experience the powerful play of silence and memory. The silence prevents them from forgetting the nightmares. The absence of memory invigorates the traumatic experiences in their mind. The individual experience of trauma gives birth to collective trauma and reminds the sufferers that though there is no difference in food, language, music, and culture, a deep-seated border is in place, and that all these hostilities—Tridib's death, for example—are its consequences. The narrator believes in the bold presence of real borders, as he puts it, "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" (Ghosh, 1999).

The bloodbath of 1964 terribly affects the narrator. It has been an obscure thing to him for long fifteen years. He suffers from a personal crisis when he relates the riot that he had experienced in his boyhood to the riot that killed Tridib. He realizes that it is the same incident that kills Tridib in Dhaka and makes him (the narrator) suffer in Calcutta. He is entirely in darkness about Tridib's death until he hears about it from both Robi and May. The report of Tridib's death makes him more disturbed. Mukherjee thinks:

> The riots of 1964 which are indelibly engraved in his memory had, by 1976 'vanished without leaving a trace in the histories and bookshelves. They had dropped out of memory into a crater of volcano of silence'. The narrator needs to dismantle the public chronicle of the nation because it threatens to erase his private story. (Mukherjee, 1999)

Robi is haunted by the trauma of his brother's murder. That memory visits him in a form of dream. In his childhood, this dream would haunt him every now and then, and he used to pray so that it does not happen again. He still remembers the horrible "crooked mouth" (Ghosh, 1999) of the man who had broken the windscreen of their Mercedes. He can never come out of the traumatic memories of the dreadful incident. Robi affirms that the lines drawn for freedom affect people in different ways, and cannot really make them free, because "[i]f freedom were possible, surely Tridib's death would have set me [Robi] free" (Ghosh, 1999).

May Price is another person who experiences the trauma of Tridib's murder. The mob kills Tridib because of his being an enemy—a Hindu—to them. The religious mayhem killed three lives simultaneously. Seventeen years have passed since then; she, however, still feels the trauma. She has been into a sea of confusion if she is really the reason for Tridib's death or not, because she has provoked him to save the old man. It takes long seventeen years to conclude—it was a sacrifice. The trauma of May is so acute that she is afraid to be alone. To avoid the fear she always keeps the lights and television on. Her trauma ceases only when she realizes that Tridib's death is a sacrifice.

The narrator realizes that the lines not only separate people across the borders, they create enmity among people who share the same land. Montu, his best friend, becomes his

enemy only because of the border created by religion—though the narrator does not treat him as an enemy. The other boys blame the narrator for befriending a Muslim. With the emergence of such lines the definitions of enmity and friendship are also changed forever.

As it has informed the grandmother, the knowledge of the lines teaches the narrator that the border, in fact, defines the identity of people "even though they are meant to affirm difference" (Kaul, 1999). It is the border that posits people in different poles, and creates either friendship or enmity among them—who were once citizens of a single state. Though they have the same appearance, share the same culture, take more or less the same food, and dress similarly, they are different, and the lines mark the difference.

The troubled notion of identity is at the centre of the partition and all it unleashed— communal riot, bloodshed, terrorism, and hostility. The separation, in fact, defines the identity of the people. Neogy mentions the partition as a "… narrative of displacement, and dispossession, of large-scale and widespread communal violence, and of the realignment of family, community and national *identities* [emphasis added] as people were forced to accommodate the dramatically altered reality that now prevailed" (qtd. in Neogy, 2013). The reality is changed for the people and they are compelled to accept the newly formed reality and think over it.

Lines beyond politics

There is a clear border between two cultures, and the political borders have something to do with it; because "[b]orders and frontiers, shadow-lines etched on maps, sustain political separation, but even more strongly, teach the inevitability, and even absoluteness, of socio-cultural difference across nations" (Kaul, 1999). Ila and the grandmother stand in sharp opposition in their understanding of cultural identity. The idea of "self and belonging" (Twiri, 2003) introduces another type of border—the border between two cultures. As Hawley argues that "Ila and grandmother are set before the narrator as two magnetic poles tugging at his ego, forcing him to choose between them" (Hawley, 2008). Both of them want freedom; their definitions of freedom are different. The grandmother's concept of freedom is based on her strong nationalism. As mentioned before, she was, in her youth, keen on taking part in any action for their freedom from the colonial rule. Contrary to this, Ila wants to be free from her own culture which is backdated for her and she never thinks that she is rooted in this culture only.

Ila thinks that she would be a part of the "Euro-centric master myth" (Mukherjee, 1999). In contrast, the grandmother clings to her brand of nationalism "that rejects all those who choose to live beyond the border" (Mukherjee, 1999). Ila believes that history can occur only in Europe, and what happens in her native country—"famines, riots, and disasters"—sinks into oblivion. She entirely hangs on to her Eurocentric notion. "Her arrogance" as Mukherjee argues, "takes for granted the centrality of a readymade Western narrative that has been easily avoidable to her and in which she has always wanted to belong either as blue-eyed Magda or as a trendy Marxist" (Mukherjee, 1999). However, the grandmother has a solid and deeply nourished sense of identity. She is strict in maintaining the ideal of "family and nation, duty and discipline" (Mukherjee, 1999). It is for holding such frame of mind that Ila calls her a fascist. On the contrary, the grandmother equates Ila to a whore because of her superficiality. Mukherjee thinks that "[h]er more virulent rejection of Ila can be explained by extending the syllogism from the family to the nation: Ila respects neither territorial nor cultural frontiers" (Mukherjee, 1999).

The deep-rooted attachment found in the old uncle is totally missing in Ila. Her native culture and the culture she tries to grasp are absolutely different, and these two cultures cannot be united. Ila is an appropriate example of one who suffers because of a strong cultural demarcation line. She abandons her native cultural identity and tries to adopt a new identity. Nevertheless, in the adopted culture she is a stranger. Nick does not protect her when she is exposed to racial abuse she receives; he even avoids her company. He marries her because she is enough wealthy. Ila discards her native culture in the hope for acquiring freedom from the "bloody culture" (Ghosh, 1999); her judgment wrongs her because the foreign culture does not accept her warmly. Hearing Ila's experience in London, the grandmother says that "it was bound to happen" (Ghosh, 1999) because she is not a representative of that culture, and that being an Indian by blood she cannot be a British. The grandmother thinks that England is only for the English and that Ila does not have any right to claim the English culture as her own. As the grandmother argues: "[e]veryone who lives 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" (Ghosh, 1999). Neogy argues that Ila "is an alien, and an outsider and the desire for acceptance produces tension in her" (Neogy, 2013) mind.

In spite of being cousins, there is a striking difference between the narrator and Ila. The idea of home, for instance, is a matter of dispute between them. While playing "house" in their old Calcutta home with the narrator, Ila draws some lines to create a house-like shape. When she avoids including a veranda, the narrator strongly opposes. The opposition is, in fact, an expression of their cultural difference. Ila does not understand the necessity of the veranda and in contrast, the narrator cannot conceive of a house in India without it. Ila does so because she is obsessed with another culture—the British culture. As Mukherjee observes:

> Terraces and verandas, like courtyards, are essentially female spaces in our culture, and Ila's inability to comprehend their importance may at a realistic level be attributed to her upbringing in other countries while at a metaphoric level this highlights her total self-absorption, living, as we are told, in 'an airlock in a canal, shut away from the tidewaters of the past and the future by steel floodgates.' (Mukherjee, 1999)

Ila wants to live in the present and wants to be a part of a foreign culture. The narrator speaks in favour of his native culture. This difference signals the strict line separating them and hints at the fate of their relationship.

There is an important national and cultural distinction among Ila and the champions of Indian culture—Robi and the narrator, for example. At the Calcutta Grand hotel three of them gather for a drink where both the narrator and Robi refuse to dance with Ila because this is not a practice of their culture. When Ila tries to dance with a stranger, Robi prevents her from doing that, and asserts that she can do such things when she is in England, but "there are certain things you cannot do. That's our culture; that's how we live" (Ghosh, 1999). After the incident Ila proclaims that she "want[s] to be free" of such "bloody" culture. So, one notices that though they are family members, there is a solid rift has been created and transparent cultural contradiction among them and this line of rupture cannot be erased.

For the grandmother, Ila's attachment to an alien culture and the disgust for her native culture is simultaneously annoying and disturbing. She cannot tolerate Ila for that reason. The grandmother does not like Ila because her cultural belief is not rooted in the Indian soil. She notices a firm border between Ila and the people who retain Indian culture. As Kaul observes, "Ila is firmly outside the pale, her looks and her cloths inappropriate for her Bengali bourgeois origin: 'her hair cut short, like the bristles on a toothbrush, wearing tight trousers like a Free school street whore' " (Kaul, 1999). When the narrator defends Ila that she wants to be free, the grandmother retorts that she (Ila) wants to do what she likes, and that "that is not what it means to be free" (Ghosh, 1999). To the grandmother Ila's principle of freedom is based on an entirely false and wrong notion.

Ila and the grandmother are, in fact, two diasporic characters who are different in types. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan thinks that, "Ila is the post-colonial cosmopolitan, while her great-aunt is—though she refuses the term—a refugee" (Rajan, 1999). Both of their migrations contribute a lot to shaping their identity. Between them, the grandmother is the real victim of partition—though she left her ancestral home long before the partition.

The inescapability of lines

However, Tridib had a dream of a borderless nation, which does not come true. He thinks of a cross-cultural state beyond the frontier. The narrator mentions Tridib's utopian idea of a nation without any (sub) continental border or any historical and cultural alienation. In reality, such utopian state is never possible, because dystopia is a reality as the lines effectively divide the nations. Tridib's utopian hope is possible only in dream and imagination because the world that he lives in, is in fact "a world that was divided by rifts of all kinds" (Neogy, 2013).

Twiri argues, "Ghosh questions the very basis of modern nation states" (Twiri, 2003). He does not see any necessity of the borders. To him "manmade borders are shallow and unjustifiable" (Twiri, 2003). It only increases the suffering and traumatic experience in the separated peoples. Ghosh thinks "… these lines are drawn in order to manipulate our ways of thought: that is why they must be disregarded" (qtd. in Roy, 2010). The old uncle adequately conveys this concept. When his sons tried to take him with them at the time of migration, he refused, and when his niece, the grandmother, comes to take him, he declines again. He does not believe in any separating lines; he considers it a great mistake. He believes in an undivided state as it used to be before the partition and does not "believe in this India-Shindia" (Ghosh, 1999). His deep-rooted attachment to the country is perceived when he says, "I was born here, and I'll die here" (Ghosh, 1999). The reality is that if an individual longs for a united state and does not believe in any partition, he/she would find it as a dreamlike desire which will never be true, because, in our opinion, the lines are inevitable and nobody can erase them. The grandmother, the old uncle, Tridib, Robi, and the narrator, for example, somehow realize the inescapability of the lines. Whatever they think about the lines, they ultimately admit that these lines are in no way shadowy.

Conclusion

This paper proposes that the lines that separate people based on their political and religious ideologies are a reality, although one can hardly see them. This study, thus, benefits one to think about the lines from a new perspective which is different from the existing

scholarships. The lines that separate the grandmother from her ancestral home are so bright and permanent that, on the one hand, they transform her nationality, and constitute her identity, on the other. The influence of such lines is inescapable for everybody, irrespective of gender, age, and religion in the novel. They encircle the lives of the uprooted people and nobody can deny their presence. *The Shadow Lines* evokes the question whether one can call these lines shadowy or not. This thesis finds that there is no shadow in *The Shadow Lines* rather they are vivid, and therefore one can argue that the title of the novel is ironic. This finding, additionally, exposes that the effects of such lines are unavoidable for millions of people who experienced the partition in 1947, and nobody can erase them.

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