



REPRESENTATION OF POSTCOLONIAL WOMEN IN AMITAV GHOSH'S NOVEL *THE SHADOW LINES*

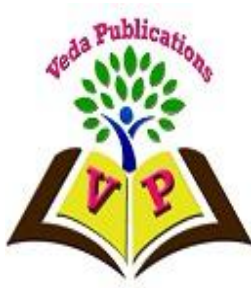
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ABSTRACT



The postcolonial women in Amitav Ghosh's novel 'The Shadow Lines' are strong and active with an identity of their own, procreated by themselves from the situations. The grandmother in the novel is a refugee in one sense and Ila is a rootless in this modern world. The anti-imperialist and jingoistic grandmother's national faith is based on her sincerity and loyalty both to her nation and family. Ila's identity is based on diaspora and conceited colonialist superiority.

Keywords: *Identity, Postcolonial, Anti-Imperialist.*



INTRODUCTION

The postmodern novelist Amitav Ghosh's major novels *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, *In An Antique Land*, *The Calcutta Chromosome* move around the issues of wandering cosmopolitan in this postcolonial and postmodern world. The characters in his novels narrate their own India and moves around the world most of the time a lonely journey, having ephemeral love relationship and ends up with a crater or silence in an aloof zone. In *Post-Colonial Transformation* Bill Ashcroft says, "The spatial significance and the frequent paradox of colonial nationalism becomes obvious when we consider the amount of emotional and political energy expended, in the name of such artificial, detached and culturally erroneous boundaries. The question of how post-colonial people are to inhabit the space defined by these boundaries, how they are to retrieve the 'placeness' of such a space, lies at the heart of the political realities of the post-colonial state". *The Shadow Lines* is the narrative of colonial historical past transforming the lives of the characters by an artificial, detached and culturally erroneous boundary separating them from their birth place. East and west meets in the novel on the ground of friendship through the characters like Tridib, May Price, the writer himself, Ila Datta-Chowdhury, Nick Price and Mrs. Price. The "Partition of Bengal" is the crux of the communal tension for the displacement of the grandmother. The postcolonial perception of personal identity is shaped by appalling tragedy of partition is obvious. Bill Ashcroft is especially expressive on this issue, "The appalling tragedy of partition is only a more obvious, more brutal example of the destructiveness of imperial mapping but it is a story that has been played out time and again in the colonial world, with the establishment of boundaries that have been capricious at best, often absurd and, in many cases, catastrophic". Even after getting rid of the colonial rule the post-coloniality has still existed in the form of secessionist attitudes, communal tension and power related complex situations. The novel exemplifies both the artificiality of national frontiers and the inter-connectedness of supposedly separate places and experiences.

DISCUSSION

The postcolonial women in Amitav Ghosh's novel "*The Shadow Lines*" are represented through anti-imperialism, national and international experience and cultural choice. They are very prominent and active comparing to the male characters in the novel. The narration of the unnamed narrator in the novel is the offshoot of his description of the history of the country and looking at the world through the eyes of the *ur-mirror* image of his relative uncle Tridib. The focus of the novel is the personal history and experience of a single family. The lives of the narrator's family have been forever changed as a consequence of Bengal's Partition between India and Pakistan at the time of Independence and the subsequent experience of the East Pakistan Civil War of 1971 leading to the creation of Bangladesh. The borders between the countries are the "shadow lines" in the mind of the people of the countries. The arbitrariness of cartographical demarcation is a major theme in the novel.

The postcolonial women characters in the novel are the grandmother of the narrator, and his cousin Ila. The grandmother Tha'mma in the novel is a very strong and active character. The grandmother was an unabashed nationalist and anti-imperialist who contributed her daily wearing gold chain with ruby studded pendant to fight against the enemy. By supporting and contributing her small but valuable property to fight against the enemy country is an expression of anger and hatred towards the enemy country which was responsible for killing of her nephew Tridib. But the irony of her life lies as that was her birthplace before the independence of the country and she had a longed for that old place. She had a desire to go to that old place in the name of rescuing her old uncle 'Jethamoshai'. When she had reached her old house the nostalgic Tha'mma had to be reminded of the reason of her presence in that place. This 'un-rooted' woman who denies to be identified as a refugee in a different nation is a prodigious and strong woman who hates nostalgia as for her it is a weakness, a waste of time. She used to say:

"it is everyone's duty to forget the past and look ahead and get on with building the future". Duty



is the prime thing in her life. She was the headmistress in a girls' school in Calcutta for twenty-seven years and was a strict disciplinarian who did not like her grandson's wastrel of time with the good for nothing son of her only sister. She always warns the narrator: "I don't want to see you loafing about Tridib".

The old-woman's travelling from Burma to Calcutta and Dhaka before India's independence was different from the present time, but which had changed tremendously after the independence along with her life. Travelling was easy then. It was a shocking experience for her when she had to fill up a form to go to Dhaka, which was once her birth place. It was difficult for her to understand how "her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality" as she was a very neat and clean in her works. Though the old-woman had a longing to go to her birth place, but she was hesitant expressing her doubt, "Do you think it will be wise after all these years? It won't be like home anymore". The cartographical demarcation of postcolonial effect has created a hesitant woman. The feeling of rootlessness is a pang that she has experienced thrust by the post-colonial situation.

The grandmother was an exemplar of militant nationalism that had lived the nationalist dream and experienced the success it gave to people as well as suffered too as it was a stumbling block to their lives. The values of the militant nationalism were learnt by the grandmother from her youthful desire to be free as it was based on the violent anti-colonial struggle. When Tha'mma was in college in Bengal in the early decades of that century some terrorist societies like Anushilan and Jugantar were active and recruited cadres from amongst the students of her classmates. The story is narrated by the grandmother to her grandson how one of her classmates was arrested by the police in the college premises. The meek, shy, bearded boy seemed an unlikely terrorist, but at the time of his arrest he did not betray any fear and looked at the British officer's face, 'clear, direct and challenging.' Grandmother dreamt of being a help to her meek terrorist classmate, "if only she had known, if she had been working with him, she would have warned him somehow, she would have saved him, she would

have gone to Khulna with him too, and stood with his side, with a pistol with her hands, waiting for the English magistrate . . .".

She is presented as a strong but ridiculed fossilized nationalist. Answering to her astounded grandson she said that she would had been frightened, but would had prayed for strength and God willing she would had killed the British officer. Her quick respond was, "It was for our freedom; I would have done anything to be free". This personal experience creates her nationalism is a kind of chauvinistic based on the history of anti-imperialism in her mind for a sense of nationhood and of the formation of the Indian nation-state.

Postcolonial writers locate the self firmly within communities and their spaces. Space for many of them is lived space, brought alive through relationships, emotions, histories and memories. In the novel the site of the family with its myriad emotional bonds and personal relationships are almost always spatialized. The notion of the grandmother about of creation of Britain which she finds as an inappropriateness of Indian migration and Ila's living there is reflected through the words spoken to her grandson, "It took those people a long time to build that country; hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed. Everyone 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 are nation because they have drawn their borders with blood. Hasn't Maya told you how regimental flags hang in all their cathedrals and how all their churches are lined with memorials to men who died in wars, all around the world? War is their religion. That's what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood. That is what you have to achieve for India, don't you see". Once this freedom was achieved it was maintained by the same antagonistic logic to the construction of the nation-states. Her national and domestic, public service and personal activity all are based on her faith. She wants her grandson to be strong and therefore insists him to run every evening: "You can't build a strong country, she would say, pushing me out of the house, without



building a strong body". The militant nationalism was inherent in the grandmother from her very young age. She had a notion of a country without any religious and other type of discrimination. She dreamt of an Indian nation-state with an anti-imperialistic view. War against a common enemy unites people and ratifies boundaries and deepens the ideological and international oppositions leading to formation of an internally coherent national identity. The nation-state is the sole and authorized claim of a legitimate violence. Tha'mma's defining of the nation-state is a kind of modern and national necessity of good citizenship. Her search for an identity derived from her faith on a nationhood and territory which was denied to her by the history. She wanted a middle-class life of territory, of self-respect and national power which is expected by people in this world as a postcolonial nation-state citizen. Her preparation for visiting Dhaka was another experience when she wondered to know that there was no border between India and East Pakistan as could be seen in the maps with green and scarlet colours. While flying by plane from India to East Pakistan she wonders if "she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane". The answer to her son whether she thought that, "the border was along black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other, like it was in a school atlas" was that, "But surely there's something--trenches perhaps, or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land". *The Shadow Lines*, however says there is nothing in between. The father of the narrator clarifies his mother about the 'abstract' notions of boundaries and nationality: the border is concretized in 'all those disembarkation cards and things'. Only the cartographical demarcation had created an illusion of seeing a border-line in between India and East Pakistan. Lines, invisible except on paper, divide people. A nation is drawn, constructed on paper and enforced through material 'forces' like Immigration Offices, the military, the Passports and visas. A nation exists within these forms. The logic of the nation-state in the subcontinent demands that partition to be read as a single, necessary, initiator act. The notion is that there should not be more separation for nation-state in post-partition, post-independence

India. Citizenship and national borders have to be co-existed immediately and magically. But the act of partition itself is an unceasing process as the old Jethamoshai asks, "It's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will ever have you anywhere". Witnessing the several history of anti-imperialism has created a cynical Jethamosai for creation of an individual national identity.

The cousin of the narrator Ila was an 'un-rooted' postcolonial woman of the twentieth century diaspora. In contrast to the narrator's grandmother she was a cosmopolitan living in England willingly with a settled life. Constant travelling made Ila indifferent to novelty and newness and blunted her curiosity and vision about the world, "although she lived in many places, she had never travelled at all". For her names of places in a map are only 'a worldwide strings of departure lounges'. She lived through her senses only in contrast to the narrator and other characters in the novel. Memories and imagination procreate a world for the narrator and his uncle Tridib, a permanent and concrete world, but Ila 'lived intensely in the present'. The narrator's excited inquiry about the Victor Gollanz bookshop was incomprehensible for Ila and she looked at the office 'with mild interest' and shrugs, 'looks like any musty office now'. Ila does not have a natural home and creates her own place in this world. She marries an Englishman, gets a job and a house and thus finds a home of her own in London. She lives there because 'she wanted to be free'. As in this freedom there is no inner voice it is mere rootlessness which is not comprehended by her. Ila's own world is based on the fleeting from her own people to do whatever she likes to do in a different nation. She is the representative of the postcolonial woman with asymmetrical emotional relationships, of the cultural dislocations and of maladjustments. She is about the compromises that accompany life lived at home and abroad. She possessed a conflicted idiom of sexuality so far desire is concerned. Her desire originates not in her own country, but in a foreign country, across the border.



Ila and the grandmother in many ways mirror images of each other in their absolute and rigid concept about their own freedom, but they are asymmetrical in situational nature. Both Ila and the grandmother were quickly and passionately influenced by the larger movements and were impulsively wanted to join these movements and the events. The memory of the grandmother of her college days to help a terrorist classmate was a passionate one. Ila too was influenced by her boarding mates in London who were activists in various movements like the Fourth International and Anti-Nazi League. Ila's confident belief that history can happen in Europe only is a colonial concept leading to the superiority of the white Europeans. What happens in India, Malaysia or Nigeria---famines, riots and disasters---'are local things after all...nothing that is really remembered'. Her rigidity grants her the acceptance of the centrality of a readymade western narrative which is available to her and where does she want to belong either as blue-eyed Magda or as a trendy Marxist. The narrator is sarcastic about her such role in politics, 'a bit role in their collective political life', but she felt a, 'serene confidence in the centrality and eloquence of her experience'. The grandmother, on the other hand never had a readymade script to conceptualize herself. As a modern middle-class woman her story was the reflection of her morality and duty to family and to the nation state. As a college going young girl her desire to help her terrorist classmate boy, her struggle to live an independent life after being widowed, her movement from Dhaka to Rangoon then to Calcutta were as duty to the nation and the family respectively were the fragmented story she possesses as her own. Tridib describes her as "only a modern middle-class woman---though not wholly, for she would not permit herself the self-deceptions that make up the fantasy world of that kind of person". On the other hand Ila's stories are a series of self-deception beginning from the stories of her school yearbook pictures to her last story of her marriage relationship with Nick Price which is only full of deception from the part of the latter. Her unhappy relationship, infidelity of her husband is a tale of modern agony. Ila who wanted freedom in a foreign country across the border betrays her dilemma

oscillating between her 'Indian' and 'London' selves, "I wish it were like that...You see, you've never understood, you've always been taken in by the way I used to talk, when we were in college. 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". Her fruitless conviction to the narrator about her relationship with Nick is only a despairing note of this free and postmodern woman.

The postcolonial women in Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* are the wandering cosmopolitan in this postcolonial and postmodern world. They are the women much suffered in their lives because of the rootlessness and the partition of the country and their own choice of place to live. Both the postcolonial women in the novel the grandmother and Ila could be recognized from one point of view as mirror images of each other. Both of them are homeless in proper sense and 'unrooted' as one is rootless and the other is a refugee. They are two active women in their lives in their own way of choice of independence. They are politically visual in their views and are influenced by the contemporary social movements and have desire to take active part in it. The postcolonial situations urge them to find their own identity in this world of artificial, detached and culturally erroneous boundaries. In contrast to the grandmother's loyalty to her family, Ila's ephemeral relationship makes her only an unhappy creature. As the grandmother's identity is based on the sincere duty, morality and faith on her family and nation, the identity of Ila is based on deception, rootlessness and a colonialist superior arrogance.

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