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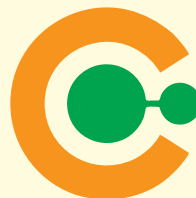
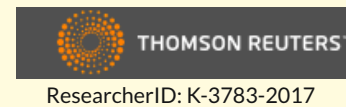
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The theme of Nationalism in *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh

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ABSTRACT

Born in 1956, Amitav Ghosh is a distinguished novelist in contemporary literature. Besides his academic endeavours, he is recognized for his contributions as a journalist. Ghosh's literary career began with the publication of his first novel 'Circle of Reason' in 1986, followed by 'The Shadow Lines' in 1988, which garnered significant popularity. His work 'In an Antique Land' was published in 1993, and 'The Calcutta Chromosome' stands out as a mysterious and thrilling addition to his repertoire. In addition to his novels, Ghosh has contributed numerous articles. He received the Sahitya Academy Award in 1989. 'The Shadow Lines' carries profound significance, exploring the lives of families in Calcutta and Dhaka. It conveys the message that the geographical 'lines' separating nations on maps are as insignificant as shadows. It deals with the theme of nationalism.

Keywords: *nationality, identity, diaspora, riot, partition, and multiculturalism*

FULL PAPER

The shadow Lines is a well –known novel by Amitav Ghosh. The concept of 'shadow lines' mentioned refers to elusive boundaries that cannot confine cultures and familial bonds transcending physical limits. This notion is exemplified in the connection between the Hindu family of the narrator and the Price Family in England, showcasing how relationships persist beyond geopolitical borders. While talking about the title of the novel, N. Geethanjali R. Prema states,

“The title of the novel is symbolic of barriers and partitions. Individuals stand divided, as do families, nations, and countries. Tridib who tried to teach the narrator to use his imagination with Precision mix is death because of the violence of nationalism ironically enough when he is trying to guard his friend, the English girl, from blind Hindu- Muslim hatred.” (Geethanjali and Prema, 2802)

The enduring bond between individuals in Calcutta, India, and Dhaka, Bangladesh, further underscores the inclination towards mutual sacrifice for loved ones. Even after the Partition of India and Bangladesh, the presence of Jethamoshai from India in Dhaka, cared for by Muslim families, exemplifies the resilience of human connections. The emphasis is on the perilous nature of nationalistic borders, depicted metaphorically as 'shadow lines' in Amitav Ghosh's novel, symbolizing physical boundaries that aim to segregate people and their cultural identities through tangible barriers such as walls or wire fences. Can these boundaries truly divide people? Amitav Ghosh's response to this question is negative. Pabitra Bharali, in her article, says,

“Through the narrators' growth from childhood to adulthood, Ghosh had shown that the idea of a national border is just a mirage. The deceptive nature of the national borders that are constructed to project an image of difference across political division is revealed in the novel. The narrator's grandmother family believes in the ability of national borders to differentiate her own community from other communities.” (Bharali, 45)

He argues that emotions, cultures, and human behaviour transcend physical borders, rendering the lines that separate nations arbitrary and meaningless, much like a mirage or shadow. He illustrates this point through examples of close relationships between families living in different countries, such as the Dutta-Chaudhari family from Calcutta and the Price family from London, as well as between Muslims from Dhaka and Indians like Jethamoshai. The novel is noted for its engaging and morally sound plot, which is episodic yet skilfully intertwined in an organic manner. The plot can be deconstructed into two distinct parts - 'Going Away' and 'Coming Home' - which aptly capture the essence of the narrative.

Within the initial section, the members of the Dutta Chaudhari family from Calcutta frequently travel to London and Dhaka. The narrator delves into events

predating his birth in the 1940s. Tridib journeyed to London in 1939 and later recounted his experiences to friends and the young narrator. Additionally, Leonel Tresawen, May Price's grandmother, departed from Calcutta to London. When Tridib's father fell ill and required an operation, Tridib accompanied him to London where they lodged in Leonel Tresawen's residence. Seventeen years later, Tridib revisited London for his Ph.D. thesis and became romantically involved with May Price in 1957. Meanwhile, the narrator resided in an Indian student hostel in London. Nick and May Price, along with Ila, also formed romantic entanglements. Consequently, a significant portion of the characters migrated from their places of origin. The subsequent section, entitled 'Coming Home,' focuses on the return of these characters to their native locales after having been away.

Upon the father's arrival in Calcutta, he secured a job, leading to the grandmother joining them, despite her nostalgia for their ancestral home in Dhaka. A moment of joy arose when the father returned home, having been promoted. Later on, Mayadebi extended an invitation to Tha'mma to visit Dhaka and meet their old uncle, Jethamoshai, at the ancestral house. The narrative takes a tragic turn as Tridib is killed by rioters. The narrator encounters May in Delhi and offers her comfort. Throughout the novel, the characters all find their way back home from distant lands, adding to the episodic nature of the storyline. The narrator recounts events as remembered, resulting in a lack of logical sequence and a mixture of episodes. This blending of past occurrences, such as Tridib's 1939 journey to England and memories from 1959, contributes to the novel's loose plot structure.

The author argues that borders or dividing lines are as insignificant as shadows; hence they are termed 'shadow lines'. To illustrate further, the author warns that the boundaries on a political map are deceptive and misleading, often leading to catastrophic consequences. Nationalism breeds violent and imperialistic tendencies. While borders may evoke patriotic sentiments, nationalism and borders foster animosity between the populations of two nations. For instance, despite sharing similar dietary habits and language, the Indian and Pakistani communities consider themselves adversaries solely due to political divisions. Nevertheless, Ghosh posits that all individuals share commonalities, with a prevailing sense of fraternity that transcends artificial boundaries. The 'lines on a map' are powerless to impede this universal connection. The author presents this noble theme through exploring the relationships between various families. The novel primarily focuses on three locations: Calcutta, Dhaka, and London. The main families from these cities not only share friendly connections but also familial ties. For example, Justice Chandra Shekher Dutta-Chaudhary serves as a judge in Calcutta, while Leonel Treswan's husband works in Calcutta during the British Raj, leading to a very close relationship between the two families. After Leonel Treswan returns to London, Tridib's father falls ill and is taken there for an operation, where they reside with the family of Leonel. Tridib, accompanying his father, meets May Price, Leonel's granddaughter, and they develop a friendship that leads to a romantic relationship. Tragically, their plans of marriage are shattered when Tridib is killed by rioters. Similarly, Ila, the daughter of Jatin and

the niece of Tridib, marries Nick Price, May Price's brother. Thus, the Indian and English families become relatives through these intertwined relationships. To talk about the novel, Jayshree Tripura and Gyanabati Khuraijam assert,

“The Shadow Lines unleashes us to the amalgamation of various cultures. It is a novel both waste and estimate and gradually the continuation of the family ties remains the same. Here, we have ultra -modern attitude with Indian manners. Bengali culture in three forms- one takes place in Dhaka, another in Calcutta and abroad.” (Tripura, 819)

Assistance and mutual love between the characters are evident throughout the novel. May deeply regrets her role in the tragic death of Tridib. The narrator's family also maintains strong ties with Muslim families in Dhaka, where their ancestral house is located. The family eventually decides to leave Dhaka due to the Great Partition and job opportunities elsewhere. While Jatin pursues a career as an IFS officer and Robins as an IAS officer, Jethamoshai, Thamma's uncle, chooses to stay behind in the ancestral house despite the family's attempts to persuade him otherwise. The house is eventually occupied by Muslim families who treat Jethamoshai as one of their own, even leading to the sacrifice of Khalil, a rickshaw puller, for Jethamoshai. The character Ila also plays a significant role in the central theme of the novel, as she travels extensively with her father Jatin, experiencing different cultures and ultimately becoming a modern woman. She eventually marries Nick, an English man, further adding layers to the novel's narrative.

In the conclusion of Tridib's tragic fate, the detrimental consequences of Nationalism are apparent. The partition resulting in the division of India and Pakistan leads to former friends turning into foes. The novel portrays the violence where May Price, with her white skin, is spared while Tridib and Khalil, with brown skin, fall victim to the rioters. The narrator of the novel describes,

“When I got there, I saw three bodies. They were all dead. They'd cut Khalil's stomach open. The old man's head had been hacked off. And they'd cut Tridib's throat from ear to ear.” (*The Shadow Lines*, 251)

The events in the narrative hold significant thematic value. The 'Mu-i-Mubarak' incident symbolizes the unity and discord among people of different faiths. To focus on this issue, Raeesbegam Usmani says,

“Ghosh simply reinvent the 'event' of partition in *The Shadow Lines* but in fact emphasizes more on the aftermath of the partition as the becomes centre of the discovery of massive political notions like 'freedom' and 'nationalism' which also explores the notion of 'borders.’” (Usmani, 285)

The disappearance of 'Mu-i-Mubarak' triggers unrest and division among Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, with Pakistan interpreting it as an attack on Islam. The aftermath culminates in the observance of 31st December as a Black Day. The narrator reflects on how twisted notions of nationalism sow division within the fabric of society.

The Shadow Line is widely regarded as one of the finest works in Indian English fiction.

Primarily, the novel delves into the Hindu-Muslim riots and portrays how the characters embark on a journey to discover their own identities. Additionally, it sheds light on the broader diaspora experience by recounting the harrowing ordeals faced by individuals in Bengal and beyond. The narrative subtly explores themes of multiculturalism, introduces new values, and serves as a powerful tool for transcending geographical separations. Some scholars view the novel as an endeavour to liberate the Indian psyche from colonial influences. 'The Shadow Lines' is often lauded for its lyrical depiction of the author's diasporic vision. The story of the novel involves two different lands separated by history and geography, as the characters embark on a journey to explore their origins. The narrator in the book seeks to comprehend the violence that occurred in Dhaka in 1964 through recollections of migration. The significance of Tridib's death is highlighted as he becomes a victim without any wrongdoing on his part. The presence of an elderly man continuing to live in Dhaka post-partition illustrates how the event greatly impacted the residents, who struggled to accept the symbolic division of borders on maps. The author argues that the connections between individuals go beyond language, religion, politics, or economics, emphasizing those cultural ties cannot be artificially divided. The narrator perceives the outside world with the innocence of a child.

In the narrative, the character of Ila plays a significant role, embodying a cosmopolitan spirit that contrasts with the traditional beliefs of the Indian woman, as exemplified by the narrator's grandmother. Ila rejects the constraints and taboos of her culture, seeking freedom from traditional roles. The grandmother, on the other hand, clings to her roots and struggles to uphold traditional values. Additionally, the novel delves into themes such as relationships spanning different generations, the impact of historical events like British rule and partition, and the search for national identity and belonging. Through its narrative, the novel effectively illustrates the vulnerability of boundaries resulting from partitions between nations outlined in maps, which separate individuals, communities, and families. The author underscores the notion that these border lines are incapable of erasing the core identities of individuals residing on either side of the demarcation. The novel serves as a portrayal of the personal quests undertaken by various characters. Notably, readers witness the narrator encouraging their friends and relatives to delve into their memories and personal archives in search of materials that align with his recollections. Each character's quest represents a pursuit of significance and a sense of diasporic identity. While depicting this issue, Brinda Bose aptly describes,

“In Ghosh's fiction, the diaspora entity continuously negotiates between two lands, separated by time and space- History and Geography and attempts to redefine the present nuanced understanding of the past. As the narrator in *The Shadow Lines* embarks upon a journey of discovery of roots and reasons, the more of the one he unearths leaves him with less of the other.” (Bose, 19)

Moreover, the novel highlights how nationalism in contemporary society can lead to profound violence, exemplified by the tragic death of Tridib. The author subtly implies the necessity for individuals to transcend narrow nationalistic sentiments, a concept embodied by the narrator. As the narrative unfolds, the progression of the narrator's character development into adulthood becomes evident. His juxtaposition with other characters facilitates his maturation process. He embarks on a journey to various destinations unrestricted by geographical boundaries, viewing them as mere imaginary lines. Another character, Thamma, is depicted with a strong connection to her birthplace, intertwined with her identity as an Indian citizen. When she flies to Bangladesh, she is surprised. She does not find the physical existence of the border from the plan and says,

“But if there aren't any trenches or anything how are people to know? Where is the difference then? And if there's no difference, both sides will be the same. What was it all for then- partition and all the killing and everything- if there isn't something in between?” (*The Shadow Lines*, 151)

In this way, the novel's narrative delves into themes of nationality, diasporas, internationality, and cultural and historical self-determination, emphasized by the suggestive and symbolic title. The partition of India remains a poignant event, yet the physical divisions did not sever people from their origins.

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