



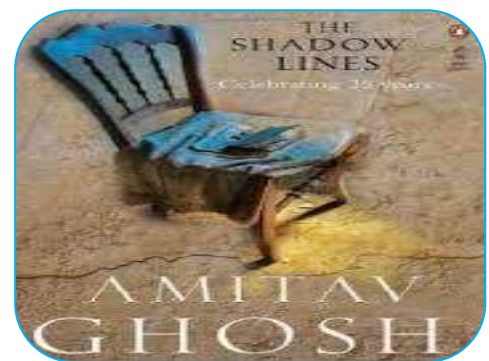
COSMOPOLITANISM A DOUBLE EDGED SWORD IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *SHADOW LINES*

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ABSTRACT :

"It may be a warning against the perils of cosmopolitanism. But some of the more luxurious aspects of Ghosh's own position derive from the same cosmopolitan culture and could hardly exist without its material comforts" (Kaul). This statement by Suvir Kaul encapsulates the cosmopolitan blanket which Ghosh wraps around his text in an attempt to offer a global positionality to the suffocating elements of nationalism. This essay aims to present a rounded approach to the issues of nationalism and the numerous ways it is dealt with in the novel.



KEY WORDS: Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism, Novel, Global

INTRODUCTION:

In 'The Shadow Lines' Amitav Ghosh presents a critique of nationalist ideas and suggests supplanting the narrative of militant nationalism with cosmopolitan consciousness. It's a story about three generations of an upper middle class and an upwardly mobile bourgeois families narrated through memory of the narrator and hence the structure of the novel doesn't follow any chronological pattern rather as per the workings of memory there is merging of time, space, situations and persons.

Along with Enlightenment and the industrial revolution in Europe capitalism saw a boom, since the driving principle of capitalism is *laissez faire* it argued for democracy and in turn nationalism, for the capitalists would run the nation state and make profit from it and therefore nationalism is by and large a bourgeois concept and one which gains legitimacy with the existence of an enemy as the government would be the sole savior against threat from the enemy.

In colonies like India, nationalism gave rise to aspirations of self rule with increasing consciousness about identity of the self and hence nationalism became a dominant discourse used by leaders during freedom struggle against the colonial master who was the enemy. However, with independence came partition in the sub-continent which exposed nationalism as exclusionary for it denies complexities of a nation by thrusting its citizens into one common identity, and therefore the rhetoric of 'Unity in Diversity' came into being in India even more dynamically after partition in order to accommodate various differences among peoples of various communities, castes and classes etc, as is articulated by Thamma in the novel.

The novel propagates a Romantic worldview by attributing significance to imagination and the ability to transcend borders and boundaries of time and space, past and present, corporeal reality and memory. The two male protagonists i.e, the narrator and his uncle Tribid both are able to use their "imagination with precision", they are aware that they have to "invent" what they see with their imagination and that would be a "truer" reality which exists beyond the superficial material world and in this sense the novel exhibits a neo-platonic point of view according to which ideas are purest form of reality and the material reality is secondary in nature. Therefore, although there is a reluctant admiration in the novel for charitable acts performed by May and Ila which suggests that political action is not completely denied in the text, yet imagination is clearly more prominent for it liberates.

This sort of liberation is not available to Ila and Thamma who are stuck in the present with their varying notions of "freedom" whereas according to philosophy of the text freedom is an illusory concept because people are constituted by their individual and collective experiences. Ila though has lived around the world since childhood has "not really travelled at all", Tribid says because she fails to use her imagination critically, for her "airport lounges were the only fixed points in the shifting landscapes of her childhood." She is trapped in the present because like Thamma she too is unable to listen to the "clamour of voices within", she runs from the visible demon of patriarchy to the invisible demon of racism in search of "freedom" and thus she is living in a delusion. Thamma on the other hand has internalized the narrative of nationalism which emerged during the freedom struggle; she is suffused with a desire to build a nation through war, blood and sacrifice. She believes in identity created by the nation states, however, being a migrant her 'nationality' is in conflict with her 'place of birth' and she remains a surviving representative of a "fossilized" nationalism. Therefore both Ila and Thamma [though Ila more than the latter] serve as negative poles for particular visions which the male narrator has to transcend through his imagination. Thus it is the similar foregrounding of the ego of the male protagonist as seen in the phallogentric romantic cannon where Tribid's and narrator's vision take centre stage and everything else lies on the fringes.

The novel argues that the idea of a nation state is at odds with the sub-continental commonality because nationalism needs to define itself against the other. The borders drawn by partition couldn't erase socio-cultural commonalities from the sub-continent and hence, when the discourse of nationalism sought distance from the 'other' by talking in binaries of war and friendship it is not able to capture the complex relationship which exists in the sub-continent that there is familiarity with the "other" which ones acknowledged would heal the trauma of partition. Therefore the silence which persists in the national historiographies is articulated in the novel with the acknowledgement of the repressed truth of partition and its self effacing aftermath which consists of riots in various parts of the sub-continent, and as a result of one such riot Tribid became a martyr of the modern nation state.

The theme of being able to transcend boundaries, nationalities, experiences and reality is solidified with the Tristan Iseult story and mention of Messiaen in the novel where Tribid is "the man with no country" and May is his "love across the seas". The ideal of a cosmopolitan consciousness is critiqued by Kaul in his essay because to turn the world into a 'global village' is ideological justification of a capitalist economy. Nationalism could be restrictive for Tribid, Ila [upper middle class] and narrator [emerging middle class] because of their class and they could talk about its limitations to be free of the baggage so that they could be citizens of the world where no boundaries exist. However, the idea of nationalism is a respite to oppressed people from across the world and hence Thamma is not just a relic but also an ideology that is thriving. Also, to aspire for a place by dissolving the boundaries of space and time is a search for freedom which is a contradiction in itself because according to the philosophy of

novel, no perfect places exist and freedom is a delusion. Moreover, an equal exchange of cultures never takes place in globalization for the strong capitalist nations are able to spread their influence .

The reality is obviously messy but the solution is not to evade it and hence Ghosh's vision though may be right is not an all encompassing point of view rather "Shadow Lines becomes a metaphor for evading political realities" and this escape is available to a privileged few. Therefore "Ila may be a warning against the perils of cosmopolitanism. But some of the more luxurious aspects of Ghosh's own position derive from the same cosmopolitan culture and could hardly exist without its material comforts".