

## THE SHADOW LINES

### CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The Shadow Lines is undoubtedly a benchmark in **Indian writing in English**. The book stirs up a number of themes. Time and distance in The Shadow Lines are illusory. The novel moves back and forth and the events are not narrated sequentially. The narrator is a man with great and penetrating insight. He cannot only peep into the past and future but also into the lives of characters.

The novel questions the efficacy of borders. The family of Dutta Choudarys and Prices in London defy the borders between them and there is a continuous to and fro movement between the two. They have good relations despite the racial and cultural differences. Ila gets married to Roby and May falls in love with Tridib. Had the tragedy not struck, then the two might have tied the nuptial knot. It, therefore, demonstrates that there is not much difference between the people across the globe. The humanity is same everywhere. It would not be too bold to say that Ghosh has gone a little too far to bring the people together.

Time and again he has tried to drive home the point that the borders that are drawn are more a source of violence than a mark of an actual separation. After the division of India, a carousal of violence was let loose. People living as brothers for centuries together turned on each other killing, ransacking and maiming one another. 'All the instances of brotherhood and unity of the past were thrown to the wind. The happenings on one side affected and controlled the events on the other.

The undivided India had long been living in peace and harmony and though people followed different religions, they stayed in mutual cooperation. It was towards the beginning of 20th century that the seeds of dissension were sown by some people in connivance with and on provocation of the ruling masters and the matters came to such a pass where the partition was the only choice. M.A. Jinna's obstinate stand for a different nation for the Muslim population was not only myopic but also hazardous. Even after partition, the people lived peacefully except those led by the rumour mills of their brothers being attacked and killed in the other parts. The most to suffer were typical plodding countrymen who did not even know who M.A. Jinna or J.L. Nehru was or what was India being partitioned for. The old uncle to Tha'mma gives entry to a Muslim family, which stays with him and looks after him. Khali, the rickshaw driver is more concerned for him than his own family; and both the innocents are killed in the riots. The old folks stay where their roots are. They have an unqualified love and a deep

sense of belonging for the place where they have been born. Tha'mma wants to get back to her native place in Dhaka and her uncle does not want to come to India. Both of them do not believe in the borders. Riots and other things of such nature are very transient in nature and get sucked up in the history and fade away from public memory before long. **The Shadow Lines** makes it amply clear.

The resurgent nature of the people's separatist tendencies is certainly taking the world by storm. Where on one hand, the world has become a miniature globe due to the rapid progress of information technology and means of transport; the other differences have cropped up that are obstacles to linking people and promotion of world peace or the idea of one Government. Be it in India or Sri Lanka or Africa or Ireland, there is constant effort to establish a separate identity by secessionists. Nationalism has been under a constant attack for these developments.

**The Shadow Lines** questions the sanity and efficacy of the borders that divide. These lines that are drawn on maps and on lands are powerless. These lines may put the people in different groups but they cannot divide and experience or memory as experienced by Tha'mma, her 90-year old uncle, Roby or by the narrator but they are certainly capable in one thing, that is, wreaking havoc, spree of violence, rape, murder and loot. In most of these cases the commoners neither have a say nor a will for such division. It is a handiwork of a few hungry of either power or ruled by fanatic dispositions.

Ghosh has also been able to comment on the riots, which are the result of people's insensitivity to their religion and the religion of others. A few amongst them, by fiery speeches or actions, play on the most sensitive realm of human beings—emotions and put them against each other. While the gullible bathe in blood and mutilation of limbs, they revel over a drink in the air-conditioned rooms.

If people think that they can divide the people by dividing the territory then they are sadly mistaken. The lines are only a mirage. Nobody can ever divide a memory or experience. The happenings in Kashmir on the eve of disappearance of the hair relic clearly demonstrated the same and benevolent nature of man. The villages on the Indian borders are more close to each other than the relatives on the either side. They still cross over without fear and get their daughters and sons married in the families across the border. These lines cannot set people free, had it been so Tridib's death would have set Roby free.

However, despite the weaknesses of these borders they also have their strengths which **The Shadow Lines** blithely ignores and no matter how much we may dislike them they would continue to exist and have their weightage. These lines, which mark the borders and distinguish one piece of land from the other, are certainly not but even if these lines were not drawn the differences would persist. Then the culture, the origin, the customs and the influence of the areas would become the natural boundaries. We may do away with the lines that we sketch with the pencils on the and by barbed wires or trenches on the land, the whole humanity is hard to be put one umbrella. This is what suggests at the present. To say that earth is but one country and mankind its citizens will be rhetorical. A line has got to be drawn somewhere. To talk in practical terms even a large family gets cracked up and divisions take place in the case of Tha'mma's joint family where the walls were erected to mark the separation. Then what can be said about the nation's housing millions of people sometimes divided by the lines of caste, religion, origin, customs etc and about the world housing the nations? Good fence make good neighbours. Fences are the touchstone of sanity, to take in practical terms. Distance separates but it also goes without says that it makes the hearts go fonder. One has to respect the other in order keep the good relationship and good neighborliness and this comes only if each maintains certain distance.

The narrator gives an **incident of Jammu and Kashmir** when Mu-i-Mubarak believed to have been the heir of Prophet Mohammad himself was lost. In Kashmir the riots did not breaks out. The situations though was very tense and volatile, did not have any effect on the health of the people. People expressed their anger; and violence irrupted but it had a difference. It was not directed against other religious communities but against all the properties identified with the Government and Police. It happened this way because situation was not exploited by the so-called self-appointed guardians of humanity and religious communities. The sanity prevailed. The emotions of the people were not played with. The credit also goes to Maulana Masudi— an authentic leader, forgotten and unsung today who persuaded the first demonstrators to march with black flag instead of green and there by drew various communities of Kashmir together in a collective display of mourning.

Similarly, when it was discovered and restored to its place there was a lot of rejoicing. People came out on the street, danced together, and distributed the sweets though Pakistan was provoking the local populace. People were chanting 'central intelligence Jindabad' while on the other side a procession protesting against the displacement of the relic turned violent and many people were killed and injured. Thus it depends upon how you take up a situation. What surprised the narrator was that even after so many killings, looting and arson, riots are transient in public and Government's memory. The newspapers talked about the test match at Madras, which happened

during the same time, and about the congress and other political news, the riots were never discussed. When they were happening the newspapers gave the details and details after details of accurate description. But once they were over there was nothing left to describe and they never spoke of it again.

The *Shadow Lines* has thus an escapist tendency here as the narrator states, “But for those other things we can only use words of description when they happen and then fall silent. For to look for words of any other kind would be to give them meaning, and that is a risk we cannot take any more than we can afford to listen to madness.” Such an approach can at best be described as wishing away the realities. But the hard fact is that realities do not go away simply because you close your eyes to it. The riots that are not discussed or causative factors sorted out would not bring one to reality and equip one to face the menace and stop its recurrence. It shows the lack of courage to take up the situation.

The state is not free from the blame because it does nothing to restrict them or discourage them. Very often the existence of the Government depends upon them. Speaking or taking a stand against them means losing the popular votes for they do command those particular sections whose wrath may turn the tide against them.

**The Shadow Lines** is a continuous struggle of the author to undo the demarcations to prevent the establishment of the borders. And to reinforce his ideology, he has even gone to the extent that nationalism is a defunct force. Nationalism has been under attack in the novel, which is perceived as a hurdle in the unification of mankind. Thamma initially is projected as a great enthusiast of the concept of the nation and nationalism, the one who would not mind holding a pistol and killing for freedom. She believes in strength and opines that without building a good body first, one cannot build a strong nation, and similar other views. Her nationalism is broad enough to include the two nations and the line drawn as border between her native place in Dhaka and her present stay at Calcutta disturbs her. She stills grows nostalgic about her home in Dhaka.

After the border between the two countries was demarcated, she believes that it separates. She believed that there would be trenches or soldiers pointing guns at each other. That the two would be distinct identities but to her dismay she finds otherwise and that is the reason she laments: Why all this killing, so much of bloodshed if there was nothing to demarcate. It would be the same when we used to take a train from Dhaka and reach Calcutta. After the cruel killing of Tridib and the old man on the street of Dhaka her nationalism shrinks. It comes to denote India now. She tells her grandson that they must treat them now with guns and bullets and gifts away her only necklace to the war fund. She grows fanatical to the extent of donating a few drops of

blood that drip when she bangs her fist on the radio. But the million-dollar question, which is best explained by Roby outside in London, is how many lines can be drawn.

Everywhere they are doing it to be free—in Assam, the northeast, Punjab, Sri Lanka, Tripura. People are shot by terrorists and separatists and the army and the police. ‘You will find somewhere behind it all that single word; everyone is doing it to be free.’ says he. He also remembers an incident when he would tell his policemen to be firm and kill whole villages if necessary to track down the terrorists for they should be willing to pay a price of their unity and freedom and on his return he would find a note saying ‘we are going to get you, nothing personal, we have to kill you for our freedom’. Roby sums this up by saying: “why don’t they draw thousands of little lines through the whole sub continent and give every free place a new name?” ‘What would it change? It is a mirage, the whole of this is a mirage.’ Even after hundreds of lines are drawn peace will not prevail. It will only lead to greater distrust and sour relations. No one can divide the memory. People in that case also [after the borders are marked] continue to be on friendly terms then why to do all this? And this also happens to be the message to **The Shadow Lines**.

Nationalism has been painted black in **The Shadow Lines**. It is held responsible though obliquely for division and separation. Thamma has been ridiculed as fossilized specimen of nationalism. However, to hold nationalism only responsible for such results in my opinion would be unfair. And to affirm the death of nationalism would be making a profound and authoritative statement.

It is agreed that the present form of nationalism can become the greatest obstacle to world unity and world peace. **Nationalism** was present in nascent form in very early societies. The tribal instinct has been magnified beyond limits resulting in political megalomania. But only nationalism is not to blame. There are other forces as well, which are responsible for division and conflict. Race, religion, colour, caste, economic difference, customs and languages are potent factors for realization of world government or world peace, Unlike Dutta Choudarys and the Prices in London, crossing national frontiers is quite a task for an average man. They have overcome the nationality and the borders because they are privileged and rich. Taking off from one country and landing in another is not difficult for them nor is their stay in different places. They might view the world as one but a common man still sticks to his place of birth that he calls his motherland and it is dearer a place than any other place on the earth. He has his reservations about other countries.

The novel has also thrown some light on the **Hindu-Muslim relationship** in the past. In the riots during the division, there were instances of Muslim families in Pakistan

giving shelter to Hindus at the risk of their own life and Hindus in India doing the same. The discrimination and differences between the two communities are predominantly illusory. Khalil was a Muslim and a poor man but looked after the old man as if he was his own father but the bitter truth and irony remains that both the innocents are killed as it always happens. The mob does not distinguish between the rich and the poor, co-religionists or pagans.