

AMITAV GHOSH AND ANITA DESAI: LIBERATING THE FIXITIES OF SINGLE NATIONAL IDENTITY

We think caged birds sing, when indeed they cry.

[John Webster: *The White Devil*, 1612.]

Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* and Anita Desai in her novel, *Bye Bye Blackbird* have endeavored to erase those areas of 'representational' and 'ideological' separateness that give rise to segregation among nations. At this juncture we may once more recall that there has been a three-way reading of nationalism: firstly, the essentialized notion of an Indian national identity as professed by the nationalist leaders who participated in Indian struggle for independence; secondly, the nationalist writers'—e.g. Narayan and Raja Rao's—way of reflecting the *ideologically constructed Indianization* in their works; thirdly, the deconstruction of that essentialized national identity by the writers and critics of the recent time. The first two approaches towards nationalism have often been acclaimed as the 'true' representation of Indian nationalism. However, it has been already shown that in the name of nationalism, what they have done is the reinforcement of the Western attitude of discrimination towards the 'Orient'. Thus the challenge put forward by the recent writers, has resulted in the demystification of the concept of a separate national identity and has paved way for 'Non-National Neo-Universalism'. Amitav Ghosh and Anita Desai represent the modern Indo-English writers, who are engaged in unmasking the fact that the long cherished Indian national identity has actually been an immediate consequence of Orientalism; its origin did not lie in a moment before colonialism but in the moment at which the imperialist project constructed the 'Other'. In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh has encompassed the pre-independent undivided India, Britain in the Second World War as well as the contemporary India, Britain and Bangladesh (East Pakistan) to establish the futility and meaninglessness of the 'shadow lines' that keep sprawling among people and countries. Taking a look at

them from a historical perspective, the narrator finds them as inseparable and identical as one's reflection in the looking glass. The 'shadow lines' is in fact a metaphor for the shadowy divisions between people who have so much in common as to be almost others' image; and the novel enables the protagonist to accept them and then to soar above and beyond these divisions.

The child narrator who has almost identified himself with his mentor, Tridib, confesses:

Tridib had given me world to
travel in and he had given me
eyes to see them with.

(The Shadow Lines, 12)

Long before he actually moved out of Calcutta, his world had expanded to Cairo, Colombo etc. Tridib had told him of the desire that can carry one beyond:

the limits of one's mind to other
times and other places, and even,
if one was lucky, to a place where
there was no border between
oneself and one's image in the
mirror.

(The Shadow Lines, 29)

Two of Tridib's stories point out the fact that people respond to similar events in similar ways, despite the national boundaries. The first one is about Mayadebi's conversation with Lionel Tresawsen. She had gone to London in 1939 and had observed that the looming war had made people behave charitably towards other. Tresawsen, who had returned from Germany responds:

but it's the same over there
--in Germany--though of

course in a much grotesque
way. It was odd coming back
here—like stepping through a
looking-glass.

(The Shadow Lines, 66)

The other story connects the blitz affected London to the riot affected Calcutta. The anxiety of the mothers for their children due to public violence like poisoning the water tank or dropping bombs in toffee tins unites them beyond the boundaries of time and place.

Ghosh employs the recordings of the Indo-Pak war of 1965 to heighten the complication that arises not out of wars but out of the irony that it is fought by people in places which were part of once one country. The narrator's grandmother, Tha'mma, living in Calcutta was born in Dhaka and she fails to comprehend how her birth place "had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality" (132). For safety, Tha'mma tries to persuade her old uncle, Jethamoshai, to leave for India in 1964. But the old man refuses:

I don't believe in this India-Shindia.
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
have you anywhere. As for me, I was
born here, and I'll die here.

(The Shadow Lines, 215)

The old man has not accepted those 'shadow lines'. Soon through the death of Jethamoshai and Tridib in the civil strife in Dhaka, which was as a consequence of riots in Srinagar, Tha'mma reluctantly learns, like her uncle that border confirm identity even though they are meant to affirm difference. Seething under

civil strife, violent riots and looming war, the Indian subcontinent becomes “a land of looking-glass events” (231). The distance in cities becomes inconsequent as the narrator unravels the mystery of Tridib’s end. The repercussions of the Srinagar incident had reached across the national border and the narrator learns that “distance is not a corporeal substance but only an illusory idea” (232). Later the narrator measures the distances between cities on Tridib’s atlas placing countries into compass circle. He finds that the so called foreign cities are nearer to Calcutta than Delhi. Moreover, the events like Tridib’s death prove that cities like Dhaka and Calcutta, inspite of the ‘shadow lines’ bounding them as separate nationalities, remain:

more closely bound to each other
than after they had drawn their
lines—so closely that I, in Calcutta
had only to look into the mirror to
be in Dhaka; a moment when each
city was the inverted image of the
other, locked into an irreversible
symmetry by the line that was to
set us free—our looking-glass border.

(The Shadow Lines, 233)

That the distance in time and place becomes immaterial in uniting or separating people is suggested by bringing out the likeness in two houses: Mrs. Price’s London house with its cellar becomes identical to the Raibazar house with its underground room. As children both Ila and narrator had played in the underground room in Ila’s ancestral home of Raibazar. But the room had reminded Ila of the cellar room in Mrs. Price’s house where she played with her son Nick. In London, the narrator is twice left alone with Ila in the cellar room. Each time it reminds him of the underground room of the Raibazar house.

Bafflement of Tha’mma at the absence of

...trenches perhaps, or soldiers
or guns pointing at each other,
or even just barren strips of land.

(*The Shadow Lines*, 151)

between India and East Pakistan (Bangladesh) provides a clue to the fact that the 'shadow lines' are imposed not only from without but they also exist within, where people vaguely think "that across the border there existed another reality" (198). In the narrator's steady 'diasporic' outlook all 'shadow lines' are erased and the relief work, organization of peace marches, newspaper reporting, mutual accusations and absolute supreme art of sacrifice both from the Hindus and Muslims only provide the mirror image for the other. The novel *The Shadow Lines*, beginning with the narrator's superimposition of Tridib on himself, through the projection of characters, events and places against one another (the narrator and Ila, Tha'mma and Ila, Dhaka and Calcutta) affirms the shadowy nature of the border and finally asserts the supreme power of imagination that helps one to be liberated from the falsity of distinction and the fixity of a singular identity, to cross beyond even one's own image in the mirror.

In *Bye Bye Blackbird* Anita Desai not only gives the merits and demerits of both the native and the foreign land, but also shows how a British girl like Sarah can become almost a perfect "Indian wife" or how Dev, who cherished hatred for Britain and the British, can transform into an admirer of the "land of opportunities" (19). Adit, the hero in *Bye Bye Blackbird* is born in a middle class Bengali family and had come to England to enjoy the freedom. Here he fell in love with an English girl Sarah, and got married to her. Adit was attending a party where Sarah had also been invited and then it was

her shyness and rectitude that brought out the protective in Adit whereas all the other guests and the hostess had only made him feel uncertain and

possibly even humiliated.

(Bye Bye Blackbird, 73)

It was love at first sight and in the very first meeting itself, he expresses his love to her, complementing:

You are like the Bengali girl, Bengali
women are like that reserved, quite.
May be you were one in your previous
life.

(Bye Bye Blackbird, 73)

Sarah had to suffer and face discrimination for getting married to an Indian. Her own people would not spare her and enjoy every opportunity of teasing her:

Hurry, hurry, Mrs. Curry.

(Bye Bye Blackbird, 32)

Even at school, when surrounded by her colleagues, she is always self-conscious, feeling glad if escaped having answered personal questions. They compel her to explain various recipes of cooking curries or would enquire regarding the whereabouts of her parent-in-laws, and seeing her reluctant and stammering while trying to answer these questions they would remark cruelly:

If she is ashamed of marrying an
Indian husband, why did she go
and marry him?

(Bye Bye Blackbird, 37)

While Adit is found declaring his choice emphatically:

I love it here. I am so happy here.

I hardly notice the few drawbacks.

(Bye Bye Blackbird, 164)

Sarah despises the treatment meted out to her just because she got married to an Indian. And when Adit asks her whether she would be able to go to India leaving the beautiful England with its silent grey church at the hilltop, Crimson blue rose vines, tufted grass and nostalgia laden violates, she answers promptly:

When I think of all the Millers of
England, I could leave at once.

(Bye Bye Blackbird, 83)

She has known and loved India through the photographs and has succeeded in wiping out the 'shadow lines' of alienness; Sarah thus successfully links her western heritage with her preference for the East.

The chapter of Adit is closed with his return to India. But here is Dev, another emigrant who had come to England to pursue higher study. He was fully determined that he would not stay in England where he has to bear all the insults and he often tells vehemently to Adit:

I wouldn't live in a country where I
was insulted and unwanted...If the
British were still in India you would
be one of those Babus who used to go
crawling after them, drooling if they
noticed you so far as to give you a kick.

(Bye Bye Blackbird, 163)

Later on, there is a slow but blatant change in his attitude:

The life of an alien appears to be enthrallingly
rich and beautiful to him, and that of a

homebody too dull, too stale to return to ever.
Then he hears a word in the tube or notices an
expression on an English face that overturns
his latest decision.

(*Bye Bye Blackbird*, 86)

At the close of the fiction one finds him completely bewitched and succumbs to the charms and future perspectives of his life in London, when instead of quitting the job and going back to India with Adit, he decides to stay in England and joins the tourist bureau in which Adit has previously been working. Dev's slow change from Anglophobia to Anglophilia has been brilliantly described:

And so he walks the streets and parks of the city, grateful for its daffodil patches of sunshine, loathing its sooty, sodden dampness. Eats toffee apples in Petticoat lane and fishes limp sausages out of pools of fat in Lyons Corner House. Lies in the grass under the green canopies of Kew Gardens, and narrowly escapes being run over and crushed to death twenty times over in Piccadilly Circus. Stands in the dark, wistfully gazing at the peacock-blue and rose-red paper flowers in a Mexican boutique, then is enthralled by the massive, blank bulk of Battersea power station... It is strange summer, in which he is the bewildered alien, the charmed observer, the outraged outsider and thrilled sight-seer all at once and in succession.

(*Bye Bye Blackbird*, 95-96)

Thus like *The Shadow Lines*, *Bye Bye Blackbird* depicts the gradual transformation of the characters from a region-bounded 'national' entity to a global citizen of international identity. Both Sarah and Dev have crossed the

invisible demarcations of the specific nationalist constructions and have thrived for a broader identity, beyond time and place.