

# Asian Resonance

## The Myth of 'Glocalisation' and Silenced Identity in Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

### Abstract

'Glocalization' surpassing the meaning of the combination between the global and the local has been an intrinsic term encompassing the homogeneous factors of globalization and the heterogeneous factors of localities, and suggest a penchant towards the 'Universality'. Almost all the characters in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* have been in conflict with their local, global or universal identities in the context of an identity crisis as a result of the post-Partition communal holocaust in Bengal. Ghosh's endeavour throughout the novel to synthesise various strings of local and global culture into a universal or glocal culture has been turned ultimately into a failure and remains a 'myth' shorn of reality.

**Keywords:** Glocalisation, Partition, Communal Riot, Universality, Global and Local, Uprootedness

### Introduction

New world is a world of disillusionment and re-awakening as it witnesses many heart-throbbing events in quick succession. It experiences the end of the Cold War, the Fall of Soviet Union and Communism in Eastern Europe, the pre and post-Partition holocaust in the sub-continent, the impact of the events of the 9/11 and their aftermath, a host of conflicts and humanitarian crises around the globe. It is really a juncture in world history where one order passes away paving way to a new order. It is at such moments in history that new concepts, new ideas bearing new paradigms, new understandings and perspectives on human experience make their entry into public consciousness. Globalisation transcends its narrow boundary bearing the mere meaning of the processes of 'free trade' and liberalization and encompasses an age of the evolution of global human community and of the rewriting of history leading to the disillusionment from the age old idea of nation-state or national identity. This 'globalisation of history' (Dasgupta and Kiely, *Globalisation and After*) in its deepest and most generic sense, finds its ultimate reality in the 'unity of humanity' and resounds perhaps the oldest and most simple truth of history ---*vasudhaiva kutumbakam* ('the whole world is one family'). Globalisation, therefore, is a perception of the loss of national frontiers in one's life, constructed around the economy, media, environment, transcultural conflicts and civil society. It modifies our entire life while forcing us to adapt and respond to the changes. Basically, 'it is the immersion in a transnational way of life, which is often neither desired nor comprehended' (U.Beck:1998). It comprises many dimensions: the technological, the ecological, the socio-cultural and many others. On the socio-cultural level it implies the integration of the global and the local, the combination of global connectivity and the local activity (hence the term 'glocalisation'). Glocalisation explains the relationship between 'the homogeneous factors of globalization and the heterogeneous factors of local communities' (R. Burton, 25-44). It is the interpenetration of the global and the local resulting in unique outcomes in different geographic areas. While in globalisation a complete shift from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* weakens community ties, the 'glocalisation' of society combine the local community of *Gemeinschaft* and the global context of *Gesellschaft*. Hence glocalisation is a more inclusive term than globalization, but less than that of the concept of 'universalisation' as universalisation emphasizes on a hope and a desire to change and create a better world of a universal order, a life of equality for everyone, everywhere. Glocalisation may have something undesired, unhealthy, unpredictable, or even detrimental. It may affect a local community and its culture to a great extent.



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In Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* these boundaries of Socio-cultural classification have been faded away. In this novel of partition the confrontation of the processes of glocalisation and universalisation of cultural communities and the loss of one's 'glocalised', 'universalised' or community identity in the context of Partition of India and the consequent communal riot and holocaust call for special analysis. If community is defined as 'something that includes a specific geographic area, an identification by the residents with that area, and social interaction among the residents' (G.A. Hillery: *Rural Sociology*), the loss of one's own identity on the basis of community comprises two dimensions: psychological identity and territorial identity. While the former focuses on the loss of social interaction, isolation and alienation, the latter focuses on the loss of the specific area and diminishing identification with place.

## Literature Review

Some of the empirical studies by different scholars in the field of enquiry have been done. For instance, Arvind Chowdhary (ed) in his *Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines: Critical Essays* (2002) tries to answer what vision of life has been created in this novel, how it has been created and how well Ghosh has done it. Angshuman A. Mondal in his *Amitav Ghosh* (2011) takes a thematic approach which enables in-depth analysis of the cluster of themes, ideas and issues that Ghosh builds up into a substantial intellectual project. Bibhash Choudhury (ed) in his *Amitav Ghosh: Critical Essays* (2009) focuses on Ghosh's idea and theory of the novel, postcolonial rationality, nationalism in the context of Partition, power structure, identity and cultural difference among people. Priyadarsee Chakraborty (ed) in his *History in Literature—Literature as History: Issues Revisited* (2012) deals with the gray areas of history and literature as a vehicle towards expanding the source materials for historical studies. Jasbir Jain (ed) in his *Crossing Borders: Post-1980 Sub-continental Writing in English* (2009) is concerned with borders, border theories in the post-1980s, seeks for a horizontal relationship among the literary expressions of the subcontinent. It also focuses on the language limitation and the measures to take to make an inclusive development. Monika Mandal in her *Settling the Unsettled: A Study of Partition Refugees in West Bengal* (2011) attempts to document and analyse the relief and rehabilitation measures undertaken by government in response to the massive influx of refugees from Bangladesh. It also reviews the assimilation and integration of the erstwhile refugees with the host state and community. Capt. Dr. Arvind M. Nawale (ed) in his *Nation with Discrimination: Literary Voices from the Subalterns* (2012) contemplated on the problems of the outcaste, downtrodden, enslaved and the untouchables and urged to make them suitable equivalent with others so that they can join the mainstream of the socio-economic, cultural, modern and civilized society. Capt. Dr. Arvind Nawale and Dr. Sheeba Rakesh (eds.) in their *On the Fringes: Marginalised Voices in English*

*Literature* (2012) attempt to explore the marginalized voices and the problems involved in crushing or establishing the oppressive power structure. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (ed) in his *Bengal Rethinking History* (2001) looks critically at the existing historical discourses with a view to examine new historiographic trends and possibilities in Bengal. Joya Chatterjee in her *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967* (2007) assesses the social, economic and political consequences of Partition of Bengal. It discusses how and why the borders were drawn, how the creation of new nation-states led to unprecedented upheavals, massive shifts in population and wholly unexpected transformation of the political landscape in both Bengal and India.

## Objectives

Present paper is an endeavour (1) to explore into this world of crisis--- socio-cultural as well as spatial--- in the context of Amitav Ghosh's depiction of post-Partition Bengal and (2) to probe into the possibility of mythical reconciliation among contraries.

## Methodology

The study is based on both primary as well as secondary data. After choosing appropriate samples primary data is collected directly. Various books, journals, periodicals, conference proceedings, documentaries etc. have been consulted to supplement the ideas. In the way of analyzing the data-based information some statistical tools has been used for this purpose.

## Main Text

In Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* characters like Tha'mma, Tridib, Ila, May Price etc. suffer in the darkness of identity crisis on both these levels of the psychological and the territorial. Most of the characters in the novel are globe-trotters. Ila spent her times in Cairo, Algeria, Brisbane, London, Calcutta Colombo and America, Lionel Tresawsen in Malaysia, Fiji, Bolivia, Ceylon, Calcutta and in London, the Tha'mma in Dhaka, Calcutta and London, Nick Price in London and Kuwait and so on. They all are highly influenced by Globalisation. If Ila is the embodiment of the globalization in its distorted form, the narrator and his Thamma have been glocalised at large, while Tridib and May represent 'universalisation'. None of them could come out of their identity crisis as they tried to locate their identity with the yardstick of the West. Ila seems to be globalised by nullifying her inherited cultural bond with the East: 'Her hair cut short, like the bristles on a toothbrush, wearing tight trousers like a Free School Street whore' (88). She lives in London because only London can provide 'freedom' – to be left alone to do what she pleases, to satisfy her sexual, monetary and material desire. She adapts nothing from Indian culture—'I want to be free ... Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you' (88-89). Unlike Indian culture, she did not pay any respect to other's culture, became drunkard at Calcutta Grand Hotel and paid no heed to uncle Robi's warning:

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'Girls don't behave like that here..., here there are certain things you cannot do. That's our culture; that's how we live' ( 88 ) .

On the contrary, the Thamma of the narrator is moored in Indian culture. She criticized Ila's European style, Saheb's habit of smoking and drinking, Tridib's failure to settle himself in life. She cannot comprehend that there may be any other life-style as good as, if not better, than hers. She in her formative years learnt the need and desirability of political freedom as a sort of pre-requisite for socio-cultural and economic freedom and development. But instead, she witnessed the most inhuman, painful event of free India ---Partition and the communal holocaust. She witnessed the hasty implementation of the transfer of political power by the Labour Party of Britain to India with an ulterior motif to indulge the newly free nation into an internecine bloodshed rather than with their seemingly unintentional lack of foresight and of the much needed preparation at several levels. It led to an unprecedented holocaust in communal frenzy and a tragic shifting of millions of people from their motherland to be refugees in another country. In the name of freedom came suffering and humiliation, loss of human dignity and a frustrating sense of being uprooted. This degradation of human values is an inevitable outcome of the fallacious idea of nationhood that is full of gaps and interstices, shaping identity against a common enemy, making territorial identity synonymous with national identity. In other words, nationalism is not equivalent to the awakening of nations to self-consciousness rather it may be said that it invents nations where they do not exist.

Similarly Thamma believed on the 'blood-relation' in the making of a true nation-spirit or nationhood:

"Everyone who lives 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're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood" (78)

She also felt the need of war to build a country:

"War is their (British) religion. That's what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forgot they were this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi. They become a family born of the same pool of Blood". (78)

Ila and Thamma represent two different faces of identity crisis due to globalization. If Ila shows the distorted aspect of that which is in favour of one single global culture, (i.e. undoubtedly Western), Thamma represents the insignificance or hollowness of national identity as is set by the Western norms. Both of them suffer from almost the same fate- loss of territorial as well as psychological identity. Ila's alienation in England even in her school-days is revealed to the narrator when she showed him her Yearbook:

"I caught a glimpse of Ila herself, on the edge of the back row, standing a little apart, unsmiling, in a plain grey skirt..." (23)

This alienation is reiterated by her boyfriend Nick Price who avoided her company before his white friends only because she was a black Indian, and again when she was attacked by some racists and left unattended by Nick. She is disillusioned about the colonial culture only after her marriage to Nick who used to sleep with other women. But because of her cultural inheritance she could not leave Nick, and surrendered to her own boundless love for him. She is left groping in the utter darkness of psychological and territorial identity crisis.

Thamma's romantic idea of 'nationhood' based on Western concept of 'nation-state' has also been shuddered when she cannot recognise any difference between the two sides of the border having no demarcating line called 'border':

"But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where's 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 (151) And through the grandmother's old uncle, Ghosh raises the most valuable question :

"Once you start moving you never stop....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 ever have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here." (215)

So the attempts to create an image of global inclusiveness with an interpenetration of various cultures have also been shattered heavily. Thus, 'glocalisation' as reflected in the characters of Ila and Thamma, ensures in itself the distinct identity of each community, and the question of global citizenship remains unresolved.

On the other hand, 'universalisation' that assumes in itself all the individual identities by dissolving them and making them part of one universal culture desired only for human benefit, has initially been shown through the characters of Tridib and May Price. In contrast to another female character, Ila, May showed respect to other cultures as is found at the Indian Railway Station where she felt sorry and ashamed of hurting the culture of India as she kissed Tridib openly there. Whereas Nick did not come to save Ila from the hands of the racists, May rushed to save Tridib from the fanatic mob. After Tridib's death by their hand, she felt self-indictment, felt herself responsible for his death. Her loving, kind and forgiving nature elevated her beyond any border of country, class, creed or colour. After Tridib's death she joined in philanthropic activities.

Tridib has drawn a shadow line of mystery around himself. People never feel sure where they

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stand with Tridib. In spite of asserting his presence, he makes other characters feel their own identity against him. He led the narrator to see his own self and the universe with his (Tridib's) imagination:

"Tridib has given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with".  
(20)

Both May and Tridib found meaning of their existence in 'sacrifice'. The latter sacrificed his own self to save other's life, the former sacrificed herself with the same design in mind. But when May cannot make out the meaning of this 'sacrifice' and commented that "any real sacrifice is a mystery" (252), she actually questions the myth of 'universality' as defined in the Western sense of the term. Both May and Tridib actually challenge the paradigms of 'universal values' that is symbolized by the superiority of European culture based on 'Eurocentrism'. They are not indifferent to the sensibilities of others. When they tried to find the meaning of their existence in Western sense of the term they were frustrated. May's attempt to restore Tridib in the so-called superior culture of the West ends as an utter failure as is evident in the case of killing the injured dog to save it from its pain, or in the case of May's goading on Tridib into riots to save Jathamoshai where Tridib accidentally got killed. At the same time Tridib's desire to marry May only because of his 'love' and a fascination for the 'stranger' proved to be a failure. They failed to realize that there is always a shadow line between two different cultures, both sides crying to recognize their unique existence. The novel ends with the most mysterious and enigmatic phenomenon of human existence---Death, that comes in between one's territorial, psychological or cultural identity and the aspiration of belonging to the one universal cultural group or becoming a universal being.

In the marginalized, peripheral spheres lived some voiceless but significant characters like Khalil, Saifuddin, Mike, Dan, gossiping people in the addas of Tridib and many such others. Although they are highly 'localised' fellows, they retained their own cultural identity. Khalil even gets killed in order to save the life of Jathamoshai from the fanatic mob, from his delving deep into the feeling of uprootedness and corresponding alienation. He is run subconsciously by the socio-culture he bears inherently. Mike, on the other hand, is run by the so-called superiority and chauvism of the colonial culture. Saifuddin is exploring silently his double loss of identity---first, as an uprooted Muslim migrated to East Pakistan and

secondly, as a non-Bengali 'Mohajir'. These peripheral characters sometimes decentralized the protagonists asserting their own identity silently in the globalised or universal world constructed by the vocal or voiced characters.

## Conclusion

To conclude, Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* bears the testimony to rewriting history by writing history by writing 'off history' (Rudrasish Chakraborty, 155), and by redefining the state nationhood or ethnic nationhood. The gaps, rifts, fissures or discontinuity in one's own historical placement or displacement is reinterpreted in respect to his 'glocal', universal or silenced identity. Partition, communal disharmony, problem of homogeneity, uprootedness and diasporic feelings have been re-examined not with the parameter of the West but with what is called objectivity, objectivity that does not mean a spurious impartiality, but that ensures a recognition of the Independent but reciprocal existence of 'the other' (Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*), or with the 'disinterestedness' which is not 'impassivity' but the opposite of 'self-interest'. It entails rather a critical rethinking of the West's so called 'enlightened values' and Pluralism, and seeks the existence of 'non-being' in one's behavioural pattern that guarantees the purity of unity and human values, dismantling the concept of 'absoluteness' of the truth and the universal. The final dissolution of different cultures into a universal one, remains ultimately unanswered, mythically plausible but in reality, absurd.

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