

POLITICAL UPHEAVAL IN INDIAN DIASPORA LITERATURE: A STUDY OF *THE SHADOW LINES* BY AMITAV GHOSH AND *THE ASSASSIN'S SONG* BY MG VASSANJI

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Abstract

The independent India's upsurge as a strong, energetic and active country is noticeably visible on the global platform, more prominently during the last two decades. Indian culture, society and history are the proud ancestral possessions to all Indians and this notion is well narrated in Indian regional as well as Indian English Writing. Indian diaspora writers also give exemplary contribution in promoting Indian culture and thus give opportunities to study the issues related to Indian diaspora identity.

Indian diaspora literature provides a spectrum of new ideas, thoughts and debates through a blend of fact and fiction. It revisits history and studies the impact of the past on the present situation. This is further studied in psychological aspects through diaspora stories – the stories of displacement and settlement, pain and gain, the stories of the past enveloped in memory, the present fighting with challenges and the future with many uncertainties.

So, it would not be wrong to say that Indian diaspora literature of the last two decades gives a mirror image of the country's socio-political, cultural and economic presence on global platform. The Indian diaspora writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, MG Vassanji, Rohinton Mistry, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni – give voice to diaspora sensibility and consciousness. Indian culture is an ancestral heritage of the diaspora writers who share the stories of migration, settlement, evacuation and resettlement. These stories help transport the Indian culture to the next generations.

The focus of this paper is to understand how political upheaval destroys national peace. Both the select novels (*The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh and *The Assassin's Song* by MG Vassanji) are written in the backdrop of such situations when Indian diaspora is threatened and forced to leave the country of their adoption.

Political Upheaval, Devastation, Memory and Respect for Adopted Land

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* chronicles the traumatic impact of riots and partition. Ghosh portrays fear and emotional breakdown of the anonymous narrator who recounts the frightful days of past when human life was devastated due to political unrest. The narrator unpacks the unfortunate events of 1964 and 1984 riots in Bangladesh and Delhi respectively. He recalls:

In Calcutta rumours were in the air—especially that familiar old rumour, the harbinger of every serious riot—that the trains from Pakistan were arriving packed with corpses. . . The police opened fire on mobs in several

places and a dusk-to-dawn curfew was imposed on parts of the city. . . ‘stray incidents’ of arson and looting continued for a few days, in Dhaka as well as Calcutta, despite the presence of the two armies. It took about a week before the [news] papers could declare that ‘normalcy’ had been ‘restored’. . . There are no reliable estimates of how many people were killed in the riots of 1964. The number could stretch from several hundred to several thousand; at any rate not very many less than were killed in the war of 1962 (SL 252-253).

The Shadow Lines is about political geography that re-defines and forces people to re-determine their national identities – Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi. This newly achieved national identity, complete yet divided, challenges them to re-craft their definitions for motherland, society and culture. Thomas F. Halloran finds that the novel’s major approach is to explore the destructive powers of borders. He quotes Gyanendra Pandey who observes that Ghosh’s novels are

. . . more than the drawing of new lines on a map, the unfurling of new national flags and the installation of new national governments. What we are dealing with is the tearing apart of individuals, families, homes, villages and linguistic and cultural communities that would have been called nationalities; and the gradual realization that this tearing apart was permanent and that it necessitated new borders, communities, identities and histories (47 quoted in Choudhury B).

Ghosh shares the fearful memories of the narrator who recalls how trauma pervaded the whole nation. The 1964 riots affect the lives of the narrator and his family members. The unfortunate event of partition followed by riots disseminates the lives of Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. The narrator says, “. . . we were stupefied with fear” (SL 225). The political unrest in Dhaka forces the narrator and his family to leave the family house in Dhaka unattended and to migrate to Calcutta. It is after the riots when narrator’s grandmother comes to know that the family house in Dhaka is occupied by her ninety year old uncle Jethamoshai and a few Indian refugees; she decides to bring her uncle to leave with her in Calcutta. She also plans to visit her sister Mayadevi in Dhaka. Her grandchild Tridib and the narrator join her. It is grandmother’s first ever visit to Dhaka after partition and she is shocked to notice the change in the city where she has spent her childhood. On her arrival, the grandmother is bemused and asks, “Where is Dhaka? I can’t see Dhaka” (SL 213).

Grandmother is wandering for some familiar landmarks that are imprinted in her childhood memories. The moment she finds familiarity with childhood streets where she grew up, she immediately sweeps into her memories and feels nostalgic. She says: “Yes, I really am a foreigner here—as foreigner as May (a British character in the novel) in India or Tagore in Argentina” (SL 215). Grandmother’s emotional memories are associated with the civil conflict of 1964. She was brought up on stories of Khudiram Bose and other freedom fighters. Her patriotism is reflected when she tells the narrator,

War is [the] religion. That’s what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood. That is what *you* have to achieve for India, don’t you see? (SL 86)

Grandmother is not a “fascist” (86) in Tridib’s words. She just believes in “the unity of nationhood and territory of self respect and national power” (SL 86). Thus *The Shadow Lines* is a realistic investigation of the memories that are rooted in the past, the memories which are never erased from heart despite trauma or the horror of displacement. Jethamoshai’s reluctance to leave Dhaka despite the risk of his life speaks for the attachment that one can have for motherland. His reply to grandmother’s concern for his safety in Dhaka is the eventual wisdom that one is forced to develop when passed through trauma and helplessness during partition. He says,

Once you start moving you never stop. That’s what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: 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 (SL 237).

Grandmother, somehow manages to get him in the car but the road is blocked by an agitated mob, Jethamoshai gets out of the car and Tridib is killed while searching for him. Grandmother returns to Calcutta without her uncle and her grandson Tridib. Political border lines between Dhaka and Calcutta have created a deep valley of distance between two cities that shared same national spirit before partition. The boundaries created by the politicians shatter the lives of the innocent civilians. The past that grandmother left in Dhaka is not found in the same condition and so, on her visit to Dhaka, her present is shocked to see the change. The memories of past hover over her mind and the invisible lines on the land leave indelible mark of separation between two nations.

Thus, *The Shadow Lines* captures the traumatic life during and after East Bengal partitioned to be ‘Bangladesh’. This book clearly mentions the role of power that brings havoc to the nation ruthlessly dividing it without taking human emotions or sensibilities into any consideration. Ghosh has witnessed the Bengal partition (1964) and also the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi (1984) and so he has authentically portrayed how human life is at stake leaving the socio-political framework damaged. *The Shadow Lines* stand as metaphor for the faint but indelible lines created in the hearts and minds of people as the after effect of the political havoc.

Suvir Kaur finds *The Shadow Lines* as an “extremely self-conscious meditation on the themes of nationality, internationality, cultural and historical self-determination” He also says

The novel offers a radical critique of political boundaries, vaporizing their rigidities into shadow-lines, but its account of the relationship between women and culture is less hopeful – for them there are no transformations of cultural frontiers, only inelegant transgressions . . . the narrative of this novel . . . empowers political subjects unequally (p. 285).

Political Upheaval, Devastation, Memory and Homecoming

The Assassin’s Song is a novel by the Kenya born Indian authour MG Vassanji who takes a nostalgic plunge into the Gujarat riot history and chronicles how riots devastate the nation and also family matters. *The Assassin’s Song* narrates the story of a protagonist Karsan Dargawala who breaks off the religio-cultural shackles of inheritance, evades his father’s requests to be the “gaadi-varas” of the ancestral shrine and flies off to his dreamland America for further studies and later settles there. Vassanji is poignant in situating Karsan on a threshold from where he sees

the blurred images of his past in India and future in America. What he is left with is the guilt conscience of disobedience to his parents and the resultant decision to return to his village people and be free from the guilt.

Karsan is a provincial normal boy who has his dreams to live life that is free of any burden. He is pronounced *gaadi varas*, an heir to his father's position as a religious Guru, Saheb of Pirbaag. Pirbaag, the garden of Pir is founded by an ancient Sufi saint Noor Fazal, who comes to India in the 13th century. The teachings-songs of Noor Fazal are of Sufi sect — a mystical branch of Islam and Hinduism.

The Assassin's Song encompasses the history from the 13th century Gujarat; finds some symmetrical threads in the 1960's of the US and the 1980's of Canada, and returns back to the 2002 of Gujarat. Karsan's journey, in the search of truth, begins from the moment he starts receiving special attention and respect as a 'saint-to-be'. Karsan is unaware of his future in his childhood, nourishes special love for cricket, shows unpreparedness in accepting the status of the next Saheb to Pirbaag, secretly sends an application for further studies to America, pursues his dream there and marries a Christian girl Marge. All is done with the half-hearted permission of his father – Bapuji. Karsan's happy life is shattered when his son Julian dies and his wife Marge walks out of his life. These distressing incidents revive in Karsan all the preaching; the songs of *ginans* – spiritual knowledge – that his father had taught him. Karsan relents:

I had been punished for my arrogance; shown up. Fool, you thought you knew better. This was what God said to his favourite Azazel-and sent him straight to help and damnation, because he has said no to the command, to the role he had envisioned for him. And the demon Ravana had his island-fortress Lanka set ablaze by a band of monkeys. Archangel and demon, they defied and tempted - and angered-their God. Their world came tumbling down. Azazel and his books; Ravana's worldly power and glory. And I — all my happiness founded on my sense of myself in a larger world, and my love for a woman, and finally our devotion to our child. How flimsy a construct, this happiness, how vain; how easily it tumbled down. Hadn't I always been taught all is illusion, all will come to naught (268)?

Karsan's repentance and philosophic monologue accentuate his feeling of responsibility for his motherland and its people. Karsan's pain increases when he receives his brother Mansoor's telegram carrying the news of their father's death. Previous to this telegram, Karsan had received a letter from his father who declared his utter wish to see him at once. Karsan had also promised to come once the communal riots in Gujarat got over.

Karsan's guilt conscience reminds him the Hindu philosophical statement *Tat Tvam Asi* (you are that) and the Persian philosophy *An al haq* (I am the truth) propagated by the mystic poet Mansoor. The search for the truth brings him close to the shrine that is entrusted to his ancestors. A migrant like Karsan, carries a baggage full of ancient heritage of myths and mysteries; and who is looking forward to a future far away in a distant land of modernity and individuality. Karsan escapes to America leaving behind the socio-cultural and religio-familial duties, and when all is lost on the adopted land seeks shelter in his homeland. On his return he finds the shrine in a dilapidated state. What he finds is just contrary to his childhood lessons of secularism, taught by his father:

Caste, class, faith, language. I never gave them much heed as a child. I was tutored by my father in the garden of my ancestors to believe that our differences are superficial; in fact, nonexistence. My brother was less fortunate; and for him life is all division. And so my bitterness is gentle — stereotypically Indian, you might say — compared to the rage he harbours (AS 147).

Relationship with the past and focus on the future are the key thoughts that strike Karsan on the new land. Karsan crosses the geographical and cultural borders and leaves behind his past and enthusiastically begins his life with a new identity in Harvard University. Karsan's decision to create a new identity is substantiated by Bill Ashcroft who believes:

Identities are not fixed. They are formed and transformed continuously by transcultural interaction, appropriation and transformation. Identities operate upon choice. The 'belief' that one has a choice in changing and reshaping of one's life and society in which one lives is extremely empowering (qtd. in Jasbir 201).

This empowering belief instills strength to the diaspora to experience a new living pattern in a new land. But the wide cultural difference alienates the new adoptee like Karsan who "was called a nerd, though not offensively; . . . an alien after all" (AS 221). The "voyage of discovery" (AS 221) that Karsan begins with courage, valour and determination reaches the stage where all the adopted belongings and possessions give a blurred image and what emerges as more valuable is the duty call from the motherland. It becomes a pristine thought of his mind to conform to the duty to look after Pirbaag — the age old family legacy, to be the protector of the innocent worshippers' sense and sensibilities that are attached to Pirbaag and thus to serve his parents and motherland. Vassanji shows Karsan in a disturbed state to hear about the 2002 communal riots. This real incident gives shivers also to Vassanji who makes an emotional and duty-bound visit to his ancestral land, Gujarat. He is disturbed to know about riots occurring in the state of Mahatma Gandhi whose life message is 'nonviolence'.

In an interview, Vassanji says, "You just say India is a part of you, in some way, and everything is a part of you — the good and the bad . . . I suppose I tried to look at that in this book [*The Assassin's Song*]" (Interview John Burns). About his visit to India, he says he was embraced like a "long-lost son", (Interview John Burns) but he was sickened by the violence.

It is through the protagonist Karsan that Vassanji shares his own worry, concern and also the sense of shame "that the most ghastly violence imaginable, perpetrated on women and children, could occur in the state of Gandhi" (AS 279). The riots have turned Karsan's brother Mansoor to be Muslim. Karsan finds him forgetting Bapuji's preaching: "There's nothing to choose, Karsan, we have been shown our path in which there is neither Hindu nor Muslim, nor Christian nor Sikh, just the One. Brahman, the Absolute. Ishvar. Allah God" (AS 281).

Unlike Karsan, his brother Mansoor fails to understand Bapuji's preaching and eventually he is one of the suspects in the unfortunate Hindu-Muslim communal riot in Gujarat that takes place after the Godhra incident. He is suspected to be associated with the terrorist group 'Lashkar' in Delhi. When Karsan recognises him under the disguise of Omar Bhai in Ahmedabad, he asks him to seek shelter of police but by this time Mansoor has developed utter distrust for his brother. He shouts at Karsan: "You are a false Saheb. You forfeited your status of successor when you abandoned us" (AS 288). Driven by the communal rift, Mansoor volunteers

as the protector of Muslims and also the shrine. The communal riots create a wide gap between the brothers. Karsan relents:

Here we were, two bereaved brothers without a relation in the country, strangers to one another, yet hopelessly entangled with each other. He with his familiarity and antagonism towards me, and his easy dependence on me, and I with my guilty concern and fear for him. I did not believe he cared a whit for me; he assumed he knew me, and what he gave me of his life story was selected only to wound (AS 287).

Mansoor changes his identity first to some Omarbhai and then to Professor Ashok Bhalla. His plan was to run away from the police who “want bodies . . . a manufactured Kashmiri terrorist killed in a so-called encounter” (AS 288)! Later he is caught from Pakistan. This shows his divided mindset that “organised a defense force . . . Militia” (AS 317) against the Hindu community. He gets provoked by the rumours that his ancestral village Haripir is on the rioters list and decides to be the savior. Vassanji draws a parallel with a difference in presenting the reasons behind Karsan’s and Mansoor’s decisions to be the protectors of Pirbaag. It is in these circumstances that Karsan ponders: “Can you never escape your destiny? Am I too much of Indian, despite my three decades spent in west” (AS 327)?

Karsan’s return is long awaited at Pirbaag and so the grand reception by the people of Haripir almost moves him. He shoulders the responsibilities as the caretaker of Pirbaag but his vigilant mind asks him “are you real” (AS 331)? Karsan’s new life at Pirbaag begins with this unanswered question. He silently accepts the role of ‘saheb of Pirbaag’ (AS 306) and follows the path of truth keeping himself detached to the inherited “gaadi” (AS 34) — legacy. The “voyage of discovery” (AS 221) that Karsan is headed towards leads him first to the material pleasure and then spiritual.

The reading of the text perplexes with the identity of the Assassin and the role of his songs. Vassanji belongs to an Ismailia Khoja community of Soofi sect that believes in harmony and peace. The religious guru of this sect is Nur Fazal who escapes the persecution in Iran and comes to Gujarat, India where Vishal Dev, the 12th century King in Patan, Gujarat shelters him. Vassanji belonging to the same sect constructs a plot in *The Assassin’s Song* where Nur Fazal’s shrine is inherited by Dargawala family. Karsan returns to Pirbaag when he has lost his father, brother—one of the suspects in riots and also his family – wife and son – in America.

Conclusion:

Both these novels are structured against the backdrop of riots and massacres. The protagonists of both these novels (the narrator in *The Shadow Lines* and Karsan in *The Assassin’s Song*) nurture the memory of loss and destruction. The narrator lost his dear uncle Tridib and greatgranduncle in Dhaka riots in 1964 and Karsan lost his brother Mansoor in Gujarat riots in 2002. Both these novels talk about personal loss as well as public loss. These novels are deep down in history and stand exemplary for a well-researched and structured plot, also witnessed by the authours. By portraying Grandmother’s journey to Dhaka (not a part of India after partition) and Karsan’s return to India, the respective authors present the “continuous and unexpected “renewal” of the cultural landscape” (Jha: 2). It is memory around which both the novels revolve. Amitav Ghosh and MG Vassanji, the diasporic writers have given voice to human emotions and sensibilities

against the polity of the prevalent times which has been found as key theme in many of the Indian English novels.

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