

Does 'cosmopolitanism' exist?: Deconstructing Goutam Ghose's Shankhachil

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Abstract:

In the heyday of globalization, we tend to promote a cosmopolitan society "where the mind is without fear, and the head is held high" (Tagore). On the one hand, we participate in international conferences, summits, and seminars to talk about internationalism and treat ourselves as a 'global tribe'; on the other hand, we impose more restrictions on borders so that no immigrants can infiltrate our country. Since the partition of the Indian subcontinent, South Asia has witnessed several border disputes among its member countries, especially between India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Due to such hostile relationships between neighboring countries, immigrants suffer a lot while a/an medical emergency or ethnic cleansing is being executed. In this context, Goutam Ghose's *Shankhachil* (2016) is a remarkable one that unravels the problem of middle-class Bangladeshi parents who secretly came across the border to treat their daughter. The family undergoes a traumatic

situation, and their suffering interrogates the idea of internationalism and brings forth the infeasibility and fragility of the same. The tragedy of one single family represents the plight of thousands. Is there no end to the hostility among South Asian countries? How can we practically follow the theories of 'cosmopolitanism' and 'internationalism'? How can we implement Tagore's idea of man's religion to ensure internationalism? This paper will address all pertinent questions concerning Ghose's '*Shankhachil*.'

Keywords: Border, Internationalism, Cosmopolitanism, Global Tribe, and Religion of Man.



Fig.1.1 Borderless boundary (Ghose)

Since time immemorial, on the one hand, men have been living together, and on the other hand, they are fighting for resources, land, and above all, for 'nothing.' Men are believed to be so intellectual and creative that they even showcase their aesthetic minds while manufacturing destructive weapons. That is why a few people look at the Mushroom cloud from the atomic bombing of Nagasaki (Japan) in August 1945 as artistic excellence of humanity. On the same pedestal, people of similar artistic taste might have considered the gas chambers of the Holocaust as the superior creative genius of human beings. For such people, the barbed wire between two countries can also be a site of aesthetic pleasure. We wish they would have experienced the atomic attack in Japan or deadly gases in the chambers of Germany, or displacement across the border during partition. However, our aim in this article is not to criticize the elites with similar tastes in art but rather to delve into art and reality in search of 'humanism' and inclusive idea like 'cosmopolitanism' whether these exist or not. Robert Fine defines it as follows: "Subjectively, cosmopolitanism is a form of consciousness that involves an

understanding of the concept of cosmopolitanism and a capacity to deploy this concept in imaginative and reflective ways" (XIII). No nation-state nor a world government can guarantee universality; only "a highly organized and mechanized humanity" (Arendt, 299) can end human beings' relentless struggle for mutual acceptance as equals. Interestingly, Rabindranath Tagore has also depicted man's nature as follows: "From the time when Man became truly conscious of his self, he also became conscious of a mysterious spirit of unity which found its manifestation through him in his society. It is a subtle relationship between individuals, not for any practical purpose but its ultimate truth, not a sum of arithmetic but a value of life. Somehow Man has felt that this comprehensive spirit of unity has a divine character which could claim the sacrifice of all that is individual in him, that in it dwells his highest meaning transcending his limited self, representing his best freedom" (128). Here Tagore has emphasized man's spirit of unity which we lack nowadays. On the contrary, we find ourselves within the narrow domestic walls. Unless we look beyond our interior space,

the harmony of man with his fellow being, neighboring clan, or country will remain unattained. Our entire world is broken up into artificial borders where free movement is restricted; refugees, who seek asylum in a country with plenty of human resources already available, are badly treated by socio-politico-economic conditions. Hence, this scenario triggers the following questions: a) Why do we not find ways to live in 'perpetual peace' instead of investing our time and resources in manufacturing deadly weapons? b) Why do we not withdraw visible and invisible borders between 'us' and 'them'?

To get an answer to such questions, Tagore's 'Nationalism' can be a guide book where he elaborates on the problems revolving around the nation and its

remedies: "During the evolution of the nation, the moral culture of brotherhood was limited by geographical boundaries because at that time those boundaries were true. Now they have become imaginary lines of tradition divested of the qualities of real obstacles. So the time has come when man's moral nature must deal with this great fact with all seriousness or perish...If this persists indefinitely and armaments exaggerate themselves to unimaginable absurdities, machines and storehouses envelop this fair earth with their dirt...Therefore a man will have to exert all his power of love and clarity of vision to make another great moral adjustment which will comprehend the whole world of men and not merely the fractional groups of nationality" (89-90).



Fig. 1.2 Life and death between barbed wires (Ghose)

Since the drawing of the Radcliffe Line on the map of the Indian subcontinent in the year 1947, the relationship between India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh has been aggravating. Many attempts have been made to ensure peace, but there is not a single year while it has not been violated. In the name of national sovereignty and its protection, countries have imposed strong security so that no one can infiltrate. Moreover, the hostility between religious majority and minority inside these countries is so intense that South East Asia has become a hotbed of violence, mainly in the name of faith and religion. Therefore, diplomats of these countries have proposed strict rules to avoid unnecessary internal and external conflicts. As a result, inhabitants of villages near the border and chitmohol in the periphery suffer due to the lack of integrity with the center. However, miseries are very copious regarding their economic stability, which eventually leads most of them to get involved in illegal means for survival. To a large extent, thick volumes of literature, non-mainstream films, and documentaries are being made to depict the tragedy of such plank maneb (marginal man). But they rarely can draw the attention of mainstream society while 'propaganda literature' is flowering everywhere. In his seminal text 'Provincializing Europe,' Dipesh Chakrabarty applauds the daring attempts of individual historians who unearth an alternative history that other mainstream historians intentionally overlook: "History"

as a knowledge system is firmly embedded in institutional practices that invoke the nation-state at every step - witness the organization and politics of teaching, recruitment, promotions and publication in history departments, politics that survive the occasional brave and heroic attempts by individual historians to liberate "history" from the metanarrative of the nation-state" (41). Every shot of these courageous writers, filmmakers, and activists, who have been exhibiting history as authentic as it occurs, is notable and praiseworthy. In this discussion, we shall deal with one of such filmmakers who does not slip into the shoes of mainstream directors. He is none other than Goutam Ghose, whose commendable film 'Shankhachil' unfolds the tragic narrative of a Bangladeshi family that lives in a village near the Indo-Bangladesh border. It also depicts the illegal journey of Badal master along with his wife Laila and daughter Rupsa from Bangladesh to India as their daughter has been diagnosed with severe heart disorder. Due to the lack of time for VISA, even on medical grounds, they have infiltrated and have to hide their real identity.

On the one hand, this film ends with the death of Rupsa, and on the other hand, it shows the aftermath of trespassing. Thus the film does not only portray the tragedy of a single family but embodies the plight of thousands of families. Beyond the narrow boundary of nations and continents, the tragedy of Rupsa's family in this film has become a global phenomenon.



Fig. 1.3 Homogenising the 'other' (Ghose)

The moment our society fails to ensure Badal lives on this side of the border with his real name Muntashir Chowdhury Badal or his wife Laila Chowdhury with her real name, the very idea of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world is one family) breaks apart. To an extent, it challenges the concept of hospitality in India in praxis. The attempt to hide someone's religious identity and to curb the otherness reflects the idea of making a homogenized society. Why are we failed to accommodate a man along with his real identity? Where is our global village? It is to be understood that the politics of a totalitarian state in the name of 'globalization' and the vision of a 'world state' have been trying to replace the existing nation-states. By employing policies that look humanitarian as well as cosmopolitan in nature, it might earn a monopoly over global power. Quite the same scenario is found in the post-9/11 U.S., where a bearded man is looked down upon and is interrogated by police in the name of internal security.

On the other hand, they have a motto, ' e Pluribus Unum means 'out of many. In praxis, their motto is not followed and invokes a crisis, namely the crisis in civilization. In his seminal essay 'On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness' Derrida talked about a novel concept like 'cities of refuge' that would accommodate everyone in it: "Whether it be the foreigner in general, the immigrant, the exiled, the deported, the stateless or the displaced person (the task being as much to distinguish prudently between these categories as possible), we would ask these new cities of refuge to reorient the politics of the state" (4). Let us scrutinize Ghose's film to get a conclusion. The film starts with a conversation between a journalist and a soldier of B.G.B. while patrolling over land and river on the Indo-Bangladesh border. Despite being routine and mundane activities of the people on both sides of the border, it surprises the journalist and the audience. Later on, while traveling to Kolkata for the first time, Badal is asked by

Sudipto whether this country (India) looks different or not. Then Badal replies, "It is the same," and the camera appropriates this familiarity. No further response from Sudipto helps us to understand that he has anticipated it from Badal. There is no room for reacting to Badal's statement, as Sudipto knows that both sides of the border are geographically identical. A history of less than a century expects us to observe the differences even when we find them alike. In an essay, I have argued that "the idea of citizenship is not territorial or geographical but political as well as cultural" (Paul 2). The artificial borders have partitioned our home and the world. Every other day we appropriate the presence of these visible and invisible borders, which Badal initially questions. But gradually, he adapts it only to survive in a land that identifies him as an infiltrator. Therefore, he stops his wife not to pray Namaz as it can disclose their identity. Thus, he who is once seen to recite Annada Sankar Ray: "teller Shishi bhanglo bole/ khukuri pore Raag koro,/ Tamara Je sob buro khoka/ Bharat change bhaag koro/ taar Bela?" (1-2) now nods to every decision taken by Sudipto. He turns out to be a victim.

The trauma that this family has experienced throughout the film adds another horizon to our discussion. Being a trespasser, Badal undergoes tremendous psychological pressure; the siren of an army jeep makes him anxious, as if it reminds him of his crime. This is how repressive state apparatus silently acts to control every being. The tension reaches its zenith when a rogue tries to hassle them and snatch away

the sum they could manage for the operation of Rupsa. During the most vulnerable phase in their life, they have been mistreated and harassed. Instead of being hospitable to them, the rogue affirms "the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" (Hobbes 78). When we discuss the concept of religious-political-based partition, we try to analyze it through physical violence.

Still, psychological trauma also plays the same important role. The film makes us think about what kind of identity one ultimately has to show. The presence of human beings, is it not enough? Why is the concept of trespassing here? Why do laws interfere here? Though we know that some offensive works happen in the border zone, we cannot generalize everything and see everyone as a criminal. Without doing anything, why do the parents become guilty trodden? While this parent gradually loses their identity and their daughter, who talks about bombastic terms like globalization, global tribe, and humanity, what can we do? Rather than giving their daughter their hand, we gifted them the four-walled chambers. Is this our humanity, then? Our discussion title invites you to carry forward the question instead of providing a simple assertion.

At last, the unfortunate demise of Rupsa brings Badal's authentic self back, and he reminds us of Cordelia and her bankrupt father, King Lear. Thus the metamorphosis introduces a more accurate and authentic self of Badal, who has no hindrance in revealing his identity and

finally recognizes himself as a Bengali. Eventually, he and his wife are handcuffed by law and order of the state. It is not Badal who fails to sustain his authenticity while he faces a danger; instead, the limitation of the state, bureaucracy, and its mechanism fails. If it is so, how can we actualize our dream of cosmopolitanism? However, cosmopolitanism does not mean the withdrawal of borders; instead, it suggests us to be humane despite its presence, which is projected in this film while B.S.F and B.G.B empathize with Rupsa's helpless situation and unofficially allow them to move across the border. While addressing the International Parliament of Writers in 1996, which is further conceptualized as 'On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness' Derrida suggested "The Charter for the Cities of Refuge' and 'The International Agency for Cities of Refuge' which appear in our program, must open themselves up to something more and other than banal articles in the literature on international law. To succeed, they must make an audacious call for genuine innovation in the history of the right to asylum or the duty to hospitality." (3-4) It is high time, according to Derrida, when we have to reform our perspectives toward cosmopolitanism and actualize it. He identifies the inadequacy that the banal articles in literature hold, therefore suggesting a transformation in praxis. The film's title mocked the concept of partition and hinted at the idea of liberty. The concept of free life like a bird is prevalent and prominent throughout the film. Russia's desire to live happily like the bird hints toward the country without any boundary, as John Lenon's song "Imagine

there are no countries...." represents. Shankhachil is a migrated bird to the South Asian countries. By referring to this migratory bird, Ghose hints toward the mutual living of the animals and mocks towards the human being's making of laws after laws to seize the co-living.

Throughout this paper, we have tried to discover cosmopolitanism's existence in Ghose's Shankhachil. However, we don't claim that the characteristics of a cosmopolitan attitude towards life do not exist. To accomplish the Derridean concept of 'cities of refuge to cherish humanity, we have to subscribe to Kwame Anthony Appiah's idea about cosmopolitanism: "Together, we can raise standards of living by adopting new policies on trade and aid, prevent or treat diseases with vaccines and pharmaceuticals, take measures against global climate change, encourage resistance to tyranny and a concern for the worth of each human life" (Appiah, 2006). To conclude it is to be said that the idea of cosmopolitanism resides in books and libraries, but in praxis, it hardly exists that the film approves" (2).

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