



Research Paper

(Re)Locating Nationalism in the Context of Partition: A Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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ABSTRACT: In a multi-cultural country like India there are rich histories to be shared across ages. It is very true that a nation is not merely a physical entity rather; its true meaning lies in its inmates' consciousness. The present paper attempts to interpret Amitav Ghosh's treatment of the concept of 'nationalism' in the novel *The Shadow Lines* through the lens of Partition relying extensively on the device of memory. How Ghosh manages to explore the invalidity and unreliability of the conventional identity formation based on nation and nationalism is the prior concern of this present paper. It also negotiates the illusive nature of manmade borders which again complicates the understanding of nationalism as discernible in Thamma's characterization. The novel also shades light on the contemporary political nuances after post-partition period.

KEYWORDS: 'Nation', 'Nationalism', 'Partition', 'Border', 'Violence' etc.

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Postcolonial Indian English writing often witnesses the valorizing portrayal of national consciousness as literature provides apt space to the practitioners to uphold the rich heritage, history and culture of their country before the world. Again postcolonial themes like migration, dislocation either by choice or by compulsion (like partition), give enough scope to the writers in delineating concepts of nationality, nationhood and most significantly Nationalism transcending the territorial physical boundaries of borders between countries. One such acclaimed Indian English Novelist is Amitav Ghosh whose mesmerizing narration in *The Shadow Lines*, fuses postcolonial nationalistic zeal with rich Indian history, family, culture, human relationship and most significantly with geographical boundaries. In an interview with Michelle Casewell, Ghosh views the value of novel that "it (novel) is able to incorporate element of every aspect of life- history, natural history, rhetoric, politics beliefs, region, family, love, sexuality... the novel is a meta form that transcends the boundaries...."

One of the most influential historical phenomena in Indian subcontinent is the implementation of the "Two nation theory" and Ghosh brilliantly exposes the very nuances of this political issue while glimpsing the dimensions of nationalism in *The Shadow Lines*. The very word 'country', both in Geography and political science has certain definitions but it bears different connotations to man. Even a man's entity as well as identity is inextricably blended with his/her country or to the native land. Ghosh here efficiently tries to complicate issue of identity, more particularly national identity by impinging strains of diaspora as well as partition. Critic Ashok Bhalla comments that "There is a single common note which informs nearly all the stories written about the Partition and the horror it unleashed — a note of utter bewilderment" (ix) and how Ghosh's narrative contextually amalgamates such "bewilderment" with acute sense of nationalism, is the prior focus of this present paper.

Benedict Anderson in his most influential book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, defines that,

The nation is an imagined political community. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. This makes it possible for emotional affinities to transcend some disruptive dissonances, thereby making space for a sense of nationness and nationalism. (5-7)

And such concepts of nation-making, nationality and nationalism in context of Ghosh's novel seem to be in flux superseding conventional ethos. In a country like India, heterogeneous culture, religion, language and again divergent issues like 'partition', often changes social milieu which consequently problematizes the notion

of 'nation' demanding constant revision of such terms. *The Shadow Lines*, as a post partition text often negotiates the complex issues of sub-continental politics and history, particularly of the divided Bengal after 1947. Again as a postcolonial narrative it keeps on inquiring the logic of drawing boundaries across nations and with this brings forth the complexity of National identity.

In this novel the shadowy lines between individual relation as well as national relations are artistically given 'looking glass' kind of effect which at once connect them and simultaneously causes division. Such utilization of mirror image in Ghosh's novel not only exemplifies connection between narrator and other characters but also between cities like London, Kolkata and Dhaka, "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" (Ghosh 170). Most importantly it is the same 'looking glass' border which puzzles Thamma's believes as she witnesses the horrifies reality of partition, "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?" (Ghosh 110).

In *The Shadow Lines*, the author chooses events from history and place them in his individual characters life and therefore, the events retain signification both in micro as well as macro level. In fact he brings forth the grave issue of nationalism or nationhood primarily through picturizing Thamma's character. Thamma used to be a fervent cherisher of nationalism as she was anti-imperialist. But partition somehow unstable her nationalistic feeling as she after partition demarcates "us" and "them" which used to be the same nation. Even she donates her precious necklace in 1965's war between India and Pakistan, and starts considering people behind border as enemies and therefore says that, "There's only one worthwhile thing left for me to do in my life now, she said. And that is to bring the old man home... thought of rescuing her uncle from his enemies and bringing him back where he belonged, to her invented country" (Ghosh 100). Critic Suvir Kaul views that such instability of Thamma's Nationalist faith is caused as "she comes to realize that the borders have a tenuous existence, and that not even a history of bloodshed can make them real and impermeable" (Kaul 131).

Although all the characters in *The Shadow Lines* are the products of Ghosh's imagination but both the characters and the plot have solid ground in sordid reality. The author has intense understanding of power relations in society and therefore aptly positions the figures into those structures. Interestingly enough each of the character here plays role of an individual keeping flow with the storyline. Therefore, it is not only Tridib, an eccentric historian, but the narrator, May, Ila, Thamma all are equally appealing. Parts of history are maneuvered in the text through Tridib whereas with the introduction of the third generation character Ila, the author highlights the issues like diaspora and racism. The narrator also plays a vital role here in binding up numerous perspectives of each character while instigating a subjective tone throughout the narrative impinging postmodern articulation of the non-linear plot.

Ghosh in his narrative beautifully blends fictional details with subverting form of history attempting to fill the 'gaps' and 'absences'. In *The shadow Lines*, shades of real historical incidents like World War II and post-Independence communal riots in both India and Pakistan are rampant. There is also reference of Hazarathbal mosque issue in 1963, when people transcending their individual religious concern collectively express grief and join for protest. But soon after that in 1964, riot broke out both in Dhaka and Calcutta, "there were innumerable cases of Muslims in East Pakistan giving shelter to Hindus, often at the cost of their own lives, and equally, in India, of Hindus sheltering Muslims. But they were ordinary people, soon forgotten..." (Ghosh 167). Again there is depiction of the anti-Sikh riot in Delhi. Notably enough the narrator points out that although Dhaka and Calcutta belong to two different nations but "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" (Ghosh 170). Therefore in narrator's consideration such demarcating lines are nothing but 'shadow lines'.

Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* can be viewed as a destabilizing outlet for the apparently fixed concepts like nation, otherness, identity, nationhood etc. using the tool of human memory in the formulation of national boundaries. The perhaps attempts to convey that although people accepts necessity of partition but the newly acquired national identity actually endorses the ambivalent nature of national boundaries and because of this Tridib jumps out of the safe car to save an unknown Muslim man. Again here, Ghosh showcases some 'contradictory nationalism' as it is for the same country for which Hindu, Muslim, Sikh fought together against British but presently due to acute insensibility and political conspiracy they are raising communal riots within themselves. Again the issue of unstable national identity is also portrayed with Thamma who is born in Dhaka (presently in Bangladesh) but gets nationality as Indian.

Apart from intertwining the personal lives with public affairs the novel also provides enough scope to Ghosh to penetrate deeper into the issue of Partition and its traumatic experiences upon the emotion of the common people. The futility of such political discourse in dividing a country is actually Ghosh's take, which neither solves the fundamental problems nor able to soothe the anguish of the displaced people. It even leads to existential crisis among those. Even as earlier discussed it generates confusion in Thamma as she cannot see any solid demarcating line between two countries. Regarding this critic Sharmistha De Dutta in her article "Un-

bordering Boundaries: A study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*" remarks that "The grandmother's very desire for firm physical boundaries begins in one way to unravel her faith in the stability of National Identities" (532).

In the book *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Study*, Shubha Tiwari significantly points out the very nuances of artificial borders in context of Ghosh's novel:

Ghosh questions the very basis of modern nation states. It does not matter how many states exist in a continent or sub-continent. It does not change the well-being of its people. Nationhood itself is a mirage because it is not based on any logic. When nature draws line in the form of mountains, oceans, rivers, it is real. But man made borders are shallow and unjustifiable (36).

Perspective on such borders is not only projected through the character of Thamma, rather Jethamosai is an important one for whom such lines are not at all significant, "I don't believe in this India-Shindia... As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here" (Ghosh 157). Even almost prophetically hints that there is no end of such partition and this is exactly what happens in 1971, when East Pakistan becomes Bangladesh. Then most significantly a member of young generation, Robi mentions that Independence actually turns into a false promise across subcontinent as there is political unrest across.

The novel *The Shadow Lines* validates the question on border whether they have any solid basis or just product of certain illusions. The author magnificently showcases through his narrative flow that ultimately such illusionary lines moves far beyond the reason of their existence. Another aspect is well highlighted in this novel by the author that is the notion of 'nation' both in colonial and post-colonial time periods through characterization of three generation people (Jethamoshai, Thamma and Robi). Again Ghosh's brilliancy gets also visible in his implementing such an extraordinary narrator who binds up perspectives of three generation and therefore explicating dimensions of nationhood across periods.

After analyzing the entire discussion it becomes evident that Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* brilliantly incorporates the issue of partition in subcontinent and its consequence in concepts of modern nation. It also provides enough space to the readers to linger upon such political illogical decisions. Again it exhibits that once shared culture, religion, affinity cannot be restricted to a certain place with such man made demarcating boundaries between countries. Critic Robert Dixon states that "The characters in Ghosh's novels do not occupy discrete cultures, but dwell in travel in the cultural spaces that flow across borders- the shadow lines drawn around modern nation states" (10). But by enhancing the issue of 'nationalism' and 'contradictory nationalism' Ghosh also tries to forecast that there are certain invisible factors operating behind such decisions like partition which also gives rise to political aggression or bloodsheds. At once the novel exemplifies the mutual co-existence of multi-ethnic culture but simultaneously showcases how the line of partition generates riots among mass on basis of religion.

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