

## Concept of Nationalism with Wound of Partition in Amitav Ghosh's "The Shadow Lines"

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**Abstract:** *India has so many stories to tell about the past, present and the future. It is true that a nation is not there if it is not part of one's own consciousness. A nation does not exist as a physical entity, but lives by and speaks to us through the culture-soul. The present paper is intended to examine Amitav Ghosh's treatment of nationalism in "The Shadow Lines" (1988), which as a memory novel, sketches few historical events like the freedom movement in Bengal, the Second World War and the Partition of India in 1947 and the communal riots in Bangladesh and India. In this novel, Ghosh describe concept of nationalism in Indian. The fervent nationalism upheld by grandmother is put to question and re-analysis. Ghosh explores the unreality and invalidity of traditional identity constructions such as nation and nationalism. Amitav Ghosh's 'The Shadow Line's focusses on the meanings and shades of political nuances in contemporary life. The quest for political freedom, violence in modern life are aptly delineated in the novel.*

**Keywords:** *Postcolonial, Nationalism, Violence. The Shadow Line, Political Freedom*

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### I. Introduction

The tragedy of partition provided the writers with the occasion to write about the plight of the people in the subcontinent in order to bring home mainly to the western world the impact of British rule, which had previously boasted of civilizing mission. India got independence through bloodshed and migration. In fact, the partition theme in Indian novels in English set the dystopian tune, which would be later on carried on to the tone of the postcolonial theories. Post colonialism began as recognition of the dominant post-war economic and political conditions are prevalent all over the world. The postcolonial writers all over the world assert that their countries possessed a prestigious history, culture and heritage; and they also valorise the past from which they have drawn the raw materials for their works. The traditional view and territorial entity are the unique character generated through their migration from one region to the other or from one settlement to another settlement are raw source of post colonial writers' work

He has emerged as a prominent writer with the force of sheer verisimilitude and versatility. Besides this, a vast range of characters lend a quality of cosmopolitanism to his subject. His issues are local and global at the same time making the themes universal. His opus is marked with the traits of interdisciplinary and post modernity; continuous innovation and occupation with a variety of subjects. Ghosh is conscious of the role of an author and his own stand on his role as an author. His views on society, language, culture, human relationship, nation and geographical boundaries are all painted with his beliefs. These ideologies also determine his choices as a craftsman of storytelling. In an interview he expressed the same in the following words: —For me the value of the novel, as a form, is that, it is able to incorporate element of every aspect of life- history, natural history, rhetoric, politics beliefs, region, family, love, sexuality. As I see, it is the novel is a meta form that transcends the boundaries that circumscribe other kinds of writing rendering meaningless the usual workday distinctions between historian, journalist, anthropologist etc. (Ghosh in an interview with Michelle Casewell.)

In his novels Amitav Ghosh explores the ideas of nationhood and Diasporas, ideas that involve relationships between individuals belonging to the same or to different communities that sometimes transgress and transcend the shadow lines of political borders. The Shadow Lines probably represents Ghosh's most direct confrontation with nationalism and national identity and it is simultaneously about each character's personal identity. Both in Political Science and Geography there is a specific definition of a country or a state. The word 'Country,' however, bears a specific meaning to a man. A man's entire entity of present, past as well as future is associated with his own country or native land or homeland. In general, the part of land where one is born becomes one's homeland, native land or motherland. Within the parliamentary system it is a rule that a country will keep up the rights of people of that country but when the state is unable to bear the responsibility of a man, his whole entity is at stake. On the background of that crisis Amitav Ghosh writes an invaluable novel The Shadow Lines. This paper sets out to contextualize 'nationalism,' through a close reading of this novel.

The conceptualization of terms like nation-making, nationalism, nationality and their bearing on identity seem to be in flux rather than fixed, they are processes rather than finished products. This is obvious, as cultural or sociological paradigms are dynamic and unstable; they change, shift and rearrange themselves as a

result of multiple factors like politics, religion and language. In the face of such development, against the backdrop of a series of divergent factors mentioned above that continuously change the social milieu, it becomes increasingly difficult to think of the 'nation' in fixed ways. The critique of the nation then, of necessity, must move along the working through process of revisions and redefinitions. However, it is helpful to look at the issue from a cultural perspective, for the novel clearly shows that cultural formations are the sites within which one's nationality or individual identity may be constructed.

The *Shadow Lines* is the novel deal exclusively with the aftermath of the Partition, and also with the Partition on the Bengal border. It is important to note that Ghosh happens to be the only major Indian-English novelist who is preoccupied with the Bengal Partition, relating to the exilic movements that it led to. Three of his novels (*The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines* and *The Hungry Tide*) address, in varying degree, the aftermath of the 1947 Partition in Bengal, and look at the continual refugee problem that it led to, thus highlighting one of the most irritated and long-standing unresolved issues of post partition sub continental political affairs. In pursuing its inquiry in the logic of boundaries in the postcolonial context, *The Shadow Lines* takes up the challenge of representing the complexity of national identity

The *Shadow Lines* are the mirror image, which runs throughout the novel as a sign of those relations that paradoxically connect nation and individuals even as they divide them. The mirror image in the novel foregrounds the idea of mutual contractedness not only between the narrators and the other characters that surround him but also between the cities of London, Dhaka and Calcutta. As he discovers new meaning and imagines new connection between his and the other characters perception and experiences of space, the adult narrator comes to understand that —Muslim Dhaka and —Hindu Calcutta are essentially mirror image of each other separated by a —looking Glass border. The cause of the riots that killed Tridib in Dhaka also causes the Calcutta riots in which he was trapped as a child. As Thamma believes —across the border there existed another reality. Thus in the novel Thamma supremely confident in her belief that real borders separate nations is taken aback when told that she would not be able to see any borderline between India and east Pakistan from the plane. Where's the difference then? She asks, and if there's no difference both sides will be the same. Thamma's conceptual mapping of the nation, which mirrors that of nationalism, is based upon the unifying effects of —Tradition —represented in her mind under the guise of warfare that constitutes the main ingredient of a country's territorial integrity.

Ghosh imagines and creates those situations from history and see what happens to an individual life when he/she is part of historical events. History also records the changes and chronology of events. Literature need not necessarily record the changes in chronological manner but represents such changes. Ghosh represents the changes that take place at individual level and at national and international levels. Thus, his representation encompasses both micro and macro levels. He uses the mirror of time to reflect images of changing times.

The *Shadow Lines* (1988) can be viewed at one level as a story of a Bengali family through which the author presents analyses and problematises of many issues that are being debated in contemporary India. The story cleverly engages in its main body characters spanning three generations of this family. The story of these characters is not told in a contextual vacuum, it instead corresponds to the growth of Calcutta as a city and India as a nation over a period of three decades or more. Significantly, private events in the author's life and other important characters take place in the shadow of events of immense political significance. So there is Thamma, the grandmother of the unnamed narrator through whom the issue of the Bengal Partition and the whole idea of Nation, Nationalism and Nationhood gets discussed

All his characters and events, though imaginary, are created around some facts from the past or present. For him, the characters and stories have to be rooted in the solid soil of reality of human life. His writings penetrate through various forms and institutions of power in society and seek to comprehend human existence in totality. Power structures have always prevailed and controlled an individual's life. One interesting fact about the organization of the characters within novels is that each character is an individual and integral to the flow of the story. He also interweaves the story in a manner that ruptures any hierarchy of importance amongst characters. So if Tridib is an outstanding character in *The Shadow Lines*, the roles of narrator, May and grandmother are equally vital. Tridib, the eccentric historian cousin through whom the idea of history being challenging gets highlighted. Then there is the third generation Ila, the narrator's second cousin through whom the author brings to fore the issues of diasporas and racism. The role of the narrator is also central to the extent that it is he who articulates the ideas held by these characters and also integrates these subjective viewpoints and experiences to highlight that both public discourses like history and personal discourse like anecdotes are incomplete till they are integrated. The role of the narrator is also crucial to the structure of the novel, which is one of story within story told in a non-linear way. The novel has also been analysed by the critic Suvir Kaul in the essay —Separation Anxiety: Growing Up Inter/National in *The Shadow Lines* as embodying elements from the bildungsroman (coming of age) tradition of the novel. M.H. Abrams describes the term bildungsroman as a 'novel of formation'... the subject of these novels is the development of the protagonist's mind and character,

as he passes from childhood through varied experiences –and usually through a spiritual crisis – into maturity and recognition of his identity and role in the world. (Kaul . 268-286)

Historical events and imaginative fiction are subtly interwoven into the narrative fabric of Amitav Ghosh's fiction. The fictionalised history that he presents through his novels is an allegorical representation of subverted history in which an attempt is made to fill in 'gaps' and 'absences'. The plot of *The Shadow Lines* is woven around actual historical events like the Second World War and the post-Partition communal riots which broke out in certain parts of India and Pakistan. The novel also focuses on the events that happened in the far end of 1963 and in 1964. Mu-I -Mubarak, believed to be the sacred relic of Prophet's hair, disappeared from its place in the Hazarathbal mosque in December 1963. There was a collective expression of grief, a demonstration of all religions in which Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus alike to took part in. In January 1964 Mu-I-Mubarak was recovered and the city of Srinagar erupted with joy. But soon after the recovery, riots broke out in Khulna and a few people were killed. Riots spread to Dhaka and Calcutta. The toll increased to thousands. Despite the presence of two armies of Pakistan and India, stray incidents of arson and looting continued for a few days. There were innumerable cases of the Muslims in East Pakistan giving shelter to the Hindus, often at the cost of their own lives and equally of the Hindus protecting the Muslims. —But they were ordinary people, soon forgotten ... not for them any Martyr's memorials or Eternal Flames (SL: 230). The situation depicted is similar to the anti-Sikh riots that Ghosh witnessed in Delhi, following the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Though Calcutta and Dhaka belong to two different nations, separated from each other by the borders etched upon the map, the two places are closely bound to each other that the narrator had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other (SL: 233). Hence what happens in Dhaka will be certainly reflected in Calcutta even when concerned authorities keep quiet about the event. The narrator comes to the conclusion that the lines separating the two nations are only shadow lines.

*The Shadow Lines* can be read as destabilizing the fixed, binary logic imposed on nation of otherness, identity, history and memory in the construction of nationalist boundaries. Thus in *The Shadow Lines* Ghosh represents national identity in a way which forces us to acknowledge the ambivalence of boundaries, even as we accept that partition was necessary. On a metaphoric level is what Tridib tries to do by jumping out of the sure safety of his car during the riots and running towards the Muslim old man he barely knows. The force and appeal of nationalism cannot be wished away, just as death by a communal mob in the by-lanes of old Dhaka'. Dhaka has been Thamma's birth place but her nationality is Indian. As a young girl, she had thought of fighting for freedom in east Bengal. But those very same people for whom she had been willing to lay down her life are enemies in 1964. Feelings of nationalism had after all motivated the fight against the British. The violence it unleashed by the action of a few fanatics the vengeance that the ordinary Hindu, Muslim and Sikhs wreaked on each other worsened our social sense, distorted our political judgments and deranged our understanding of moral righteousness.

*The Shadow Lines* written in 1988 was the author's response to another unprecedented event in Post-Colonial Indian scene: the 1984 Anti-Sikh riots that swept the nation after then Prime minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards. To begin with purportedly State sponsored, these riots in their magnitude were comparable to the earlier communal agitation of 1947 partition. The novel situates the 1964 communal riots in Calcutta experienced by the narrator as a young school going boy centrally in the boy's psyche as well as in his analysis of the difference of perception that pervades the recording of such incidents. In the book these riots and the riots at Dhaka become the occasion for the acid test of our recording systems whether of our history or of our newspapers. The author creates a brilliant job by the use of excessive and mundane journalese that drowns the powerful dominance that it exerts in the author's consciousness. The author finds an inadequate portrayal of such historical events in these sources and then goes on to analyze the reasons behind such silences:

By the end of January 1964 the riots had faded away from the pages of the newspapers, disappeared from the collective imagination of „responsible opinion“, vanished without leaving a trace in the histories and bookshelves. They had dropped out of memory into the crater of a volcano of silence. The theatre of war where the Generals meet is the stage on which the states disport themselves: they have no use for the memory of riots. (SL: 230)

One of the biggest influences on the narrator, his grandmother, Thamma epitomizes the ideals of the Nationalist movement and values of India's national identity. The novel basically combines public events and personal lives of the people – mostly middle class families. Apart from the thematic occupation, Ghosh focuses on the theme of partition of India and its consequent tragic effects on the minds and emotions of the people. Ghosh projects the futility of bifurcation of a nation to create two nations, one east and another west. The outcome of such moves to draw a line across the nation is not happy state of affairs for the people not coming under preview of privileged class of the society. Neither it solves the basic problems nor does it soothe the agony and anguish of displaced persons. On the contrary the partitioned people face existential problems.

Thamma in *The Shadow Lines* inquires whether she would be able to see the boundary between India and East Pakistan. Ghosh writes through this character: —

And if there is no difference both side will be the same, it will be just like it used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all for them? Partition and all the killing and everything – if there is not something in between. ( SL:151)

Common prudence of Thamma fails to understand the justification of creating two nations. D. K. Pabby, while presenting comparative study of themes in his article viz. theme of partition and freedom in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* comments:

In *The Shadow Lines*, the development and growth of Thamma character encapsulate the futility and meaninglessness of political freedom which was otherwise supposed to usher in an era of peace and prosperity for all. (SL: 156)

Ghosh has raised a question that whether the partition is a solution to the problems of social unrest on religious grounds or political motivation. The partition creates the feeling of humiliation and agony for the dear and near ones who are compelled to migrate from their home or birth-place merely for the reasons based on whims of political solution of the problem faced by the nation. Shobha Tiwari in her book *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Study* comments: —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 manmade borders are shallow and unjustifiable.”

Three perspectives of borders are provided by three characters belonging to three contiguous generations as figured in *The Shadow Lines*. The first is spoken by Thamma, the protagonist's grandmother; the second by her uncle, Jethamoshai (i.e. the protagonist's granduncle); and the third by Robi, Thamma's nephew, who is roughly the same age as the protagonist and is his friend. Jethamoshai had lived in a world where borders were not of paramount importance, and what was regarded as important was one's sense of belonging to the place one was born and brought up in. Hence, the tone of finality in his concluding remark, ‘As for me, I was born here, and I will die here.’ He does not believe in arbitrary lines and is shrewd enough to realize that once a man started to move, there would be no end to it. His words also appear to be prophetic, for within less than a decade of their utterance, in 1971, East Pakistan became Bangladesh. Rather differently, Grandma, the second character to muse on borders, grew up in the momentous opening decades of the twentieth century, i.e. in the heyday of the anticolonial struggle against the British rule in India. Struggle was the most formative of her experiences, something that defined her worldview, and Ghosh's narrative makes it clear that though she had not literally participated in the nationalist movement, the spirit of the times had entered her soul and contributed to the creation of her own perception of self. Difference, again, is the third speaker on borders, Robi, who as an individual belonging to a post-Partition generation, and having an intimate knowledge of the communally coloured disturbances that rent the national fabric of India, notes how freedom seemed to lie at the very root of all the subcontinent's problems. As Ghosh narrativizes it, Robi's response is much more philosophical than his elders' to the whole issue of borders and nationhood.

“At the origin of India and Pakistan lies the national trauma of Partition, a trauma that freezes fear into silence, and for which *The Shadow Lines* seeks to find a language, a process of mourning, and perhaps even a memorial.”(Suvir Kaul in the essay —*Separation Anxiety*.)

*The Shadow Lines* is the Partition novel examined in this book that really questions the concept of the border, questions very seriously whether the shadow line that we inscribe to separate people into different nations has any validity, or whether it is an absurd illusion. It is Ghosh's contention in this novel that borders themselves are fictive and illusive, that they defeat and negate the very reason behind their ostensible existence. What Tridib's atlas demonstrates to the narrator, the lesson he learns after a harrowing seventeen year-long search for the truth of Tridib's death, is that in the ultimate analysis, borderlines do not mean anything at all. But beyond this, yet another interesting aspect of the *The Shadow Lines* is that it gives us a representation of the nation in both colonial and post-colonial times through characters who belong to three contiguous generations (Jethamoshai, Thamma and Robi); and it shows how the narrator, with the gift of vision bequeathed by Tridib, not only uncovers but also bridges all the earlier perspectives towards nationhood.

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## II. Conclusion

Thus Ghosh explores the theme of partition of a modern nation and has asserted futile action of the political machinery in power. The *Shadow Lines* thus puts such ideological themes before the reader for evaluation of such political motives based on illogical axis. Culture is a process of circulation that has nothing to do with national borders. As Robert Dixon in a critique of Ghosh argues: "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." (Dixon: 10). The partition is a vivid manifestation of the claim that post colonial nation are founded in a bloody in a severance of the umbilical cord, one that fortified border between nation states with irrational and remorseless violence. The discourse of nationalism, however, affects to make sense of the absurd loss of lives that occurs The novel made the reader to discover that world is not a simple place that can see in atlas but there are so many inexorable facts, hidden in that solid lines as it lead to political aggression and violent bloodshed. The boundaries between nation are like shadow lines, of hatred and hostility out of national sentiments. The narrator also shows how ordinary people try their best to seek mutual sympathy among various ethnic groups of the subcontinent. There are some people like Tha'mma believe in not only drawing lines as part of faith but respecting them with blood. The border that carved at the time of partition has led to further brutality in the form of those riots, pogroms and organized historical distortions and cultural depletions with which the history of independent India replete.

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