

NATION AS IDENTITY IN AMITAV GHOSH'S THE SHADOW LINES**R. Malathi****ABSTRACT**

Amitav Ghosh is a Bengali Indian author, a pioneer of English literature in India, best known for his works in the English language. Amitav Ghosh occupies a rather curious place in the landscape of contemporary English language authors from the Indian subcontinent. Freedom from political colonialism came as a refreshing wind to write and historical nationalist issues such as diaspora, migration, refugees, colonial hegemony; socio-economic and cultural issues like east-west encounter, caste and class etc. become the main concerns of Amitav Ghosh. The present paper is proposed to examine Nation as identity in "The Shadow Lines" 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 problematizes nation in his search for identity. Further, the text subverts notions of truth-notions that are rooted in cultural, sociological and historical realities while it exposes the arbitrariness of many kinds of lines, borders both personal and political. Although the personal and political are intertwined "Nation" presents itself as a crucial strand on the reader's sensibilities.

INTRODUCTION

Ghosh's second novel 'The Shadow Lines' is best read as a novel that interrogates a political consciousness baptized in the crucible of national divides. This novel is more somber, less fanciful in its politics, and quite stunning in the power with which its formal experiments in sequence and location resonate thematically. The Shadow Lines traces nearly a half-century of interlocking relations among three generations of two families, one Indian and one British, giving perhaps the definitive fictional demonstration of Benedict Anderson's dictum that nation are "imagined communities". It is the story of the family and friends of the nameless narrator which has its roots in broader national and international experience. In the novel, the past, the present and the future combine and melt together erasing any kind of line of demarcations. The text deals

with the concerns of our period, the search for identity, the need for independence, the difficult relationship with colonial culture. The Shadow Lines interweaves fact, fiction and reminiscence.

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 'nation,' through a close reading of this novel.

NATION AS IDENTITY

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.

Surely, the narrator, Tridib and the grandmother – despite their differences in age, location, ideology and varying perspectives on reality, share an innate Indianness, even a conceptual formulation of nationalism, which Ila, the Indian located in the West cannot envisage,

and so cannot be a part of. Here what Benedict Anderson has to say about the nation is quite illuminating. "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". The narrator's grandmother, for instance, is one such character who conforms to this thinking and for whom the nation is a clear marker of identity. She is a votary of the nation in a sense in which none of the other character is. In fact, she represents a legitimate view of the nation against which the viewpoints of others like those of Tridib, Ila and the narrator, may be perceived. Though she lives in the frozen past, the reality of nationhood is largely stable in her case. As a fervent and militant nationalist, she worries about her old uncle dying in a country not his own, almost abandoned and alone in old age. She tells her son,

It doesn't matter whether we recognize each other or not. We are the same flesh, the same blood, the same bone and now at last, after all these years, perhaps we'll be able to make amends for all that bitterness and hatred (SL 129).

It is clear that she cares for the ties of blood and nationhood, and is prepared to let go the bitter memories of family feuds. It is interesting to note that the terrorists fascinated her, and she wanted to act like them for her freedom. In response to the narrator's query, if given a chance would she have killed the English magistrate, she says:

I would have been frightened, [...]. But I would have prayed for strength, and God willing, yes, I would have killed him. It was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free (SL 39).

Her quest for freedom is, obviously, a quest for attaining nationhood; and she is prepared to pay any price for it. But Tha'mma thinks that Ila does not understand the true spirit of England, and, so, does not have the right to be staying there.

Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood: with their brothers' blood and their fathers' blood and their sons' blood. They know they're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood (SL 78).

Her militant nationalism comes out clearly when she explains the creed of Englishmen and relates it to the Indian context, thus:

War is their 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 78).

And, again, her nationalist fervor gets articulated when she gives away her cherished necklace, the first gift that she had received from her husband after her marriage, for the war fund in 1965. She justifies her action to her grandson, saying:

I gave it away [...] I gave it to the fund for the war. I had to, don't you see? For your sake; for your freedom. We have to kill them before they kill us; we have to wipe them out.' And she continues, 'this is the only chance [...]. The only one. We're fighting them properly at last, with tanks and guns and bombs (SL 237).

Tha'mma's sense of nation receives a severe jolt when she undertakes a rescue mission to Dhaka to bring back her Jethamoshai to India. Before her departure she wonders whether she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the window of the plane, to which her son sarcastically replies that did she think that the border would actually be a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other as in a school atlas! True, her response to the question of the border is naive, but her expectation to find trenches or soldiers or guns pointing at each other or even no-man's land there, makes sense. But when she is told that she should expect clouds, and at the most some green fields, she is simply amazed, and her natural and forthright response is:

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; it'll be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all for then – partition and all the killing and everything – if there isn't something in between? (SL 151)

It is easy to see why her simplistic, yet logical mind is unable to understand that the border is like a mirror, a looking-glass border, where in one looks beyond to find self-reflections which mirror conflicts and riots for the sake of preserving a self-an exercise which seems arbitrary and meaningless. Tha'mma feels utterly bewildered when she is further told that 'the border is not on the frontier:

It's right inside the airport. You'll see. You'll cross it when you have to fill in all those disembarkation cards and things.' And to her chagrin, she realizes that 'her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality' (SL 152).

She is pained to know that she is much more a foreigner in her place of birth than May, as the latter does not need a visa to come to Dhaka. As for her Dhaka, it had long since disappeared into the past and she can visit and revisit it only in memory! Her poor consolation is that the memory cannot be divided. And what about the nation to which she belongs? It seems to have failed her, as it is aptly summed up by Tridib:

All she wanted was a middle-class life in which, like the middle classes the world over, she would thrive believing in the unity of nationhood and territory, of self-respect and national power: that was all she wanted-a modern middle-class life, a small thing that history has denied her in its fullness and for which she could never forgive it. (SL 78)

As for the younger generation in the novel is concerned, they have inherited a nation stricken with dissension and disunity. It can flare up at the slightest provocation. And this is exactly what happened when the narrator was a school-going child. There were riots in Calcutta. He and his schoolmates had suddenly felt disoriented in their own land, as the city had turned against them; and they were stupefied with fear. While reflecting upon this experience as an adult he says:

It is a fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets that one inhabits, can become, suddenly and without warning, as hostile as a flash flood,' It is the entire subcontinent that experiences it, and it is this which differentiates it from the rest of the world – not language, not food, not music. 'It is the special quality of loneliness,' he tells us 'that grows out of the war between oneself and one's

image in the mirror' (SL 204).

The image is, obviously of a deadly, ghastly reality that one tries in vain to grapple with. It is in the context of this traumatic experience that he learns a new meaning of 'distance'. He understands that space meant extension, but through his immediate experience, he learns that spaces can get interrelated through mutual discord or mutual concern, irrespective of distance. The theft of the relic at Hazartbal Mosque can be used as an illustration to clarify this idea. It concerned Hindus and Muslims alike. The targets of the rioters were not people, neither Hindus nor Muslims nor Sikhs but property identified with the government and the police. But, at Khulna in East Pakistan a demonstration in protest against the theft of the relic had turned violent, triggering violence in the neighboring towns and Dhaka. Subsequently, even Calcutta had erupted. Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely related to each other than it had been before, so that the narrator had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka. These areas were locked into an irreversible symmetry through patterns of mutual discord and mutual concern of the people, on both sides of the border.

Likewise, Robi suffers the consequences of the nation in disarray, though in a much more poignant way. His elder brother, Tridib, had got killed in a riot in Dhaka, and he happened to be a mute witness to this gory incident. The most poignant section of the text is the account of Tridib's death, given fifteen years after the event for the first time by his brother Robi. Robi has been revisited by the same nightmare for long years and he tells it in a powerful and uneasy mix of dream and unreality.

If only that dream would go away, I would be like other people; I would be free. I would have given anything to be free of that memory' (SL 246).

A chance remark by a Bangladeshi waiter in a cheap restaurant in London had opened up floodgates of anguished memories in Robi's mind. Subsequently Robi, the narrator and Ila stand together. This heart-rending cry of pain and helplessness should render meaningless, practically, all carefully constructed theories of the nation. The heart of darkness, the centre of the mob towards which Tridib fearlessly walks swallows not just Tridib but all sense of sanity and discretion that makes human beings humane. In the context of the painful death of his brother,

Robi muses on the word 'free', and finds it to be a 'mirage'. As one who was entrusted with the job of running a district, he would have given orders for the killing of the terrorists if they were operating there-that was the price they should be willing to pay for preserving their unity and freedom, he told his officers. And when he went home, he found an anonymous letter, waiting for him. It said:

We're going to get you, nothing personal, we have to kill you for our freedom. It would be like reading my own speech transcribed on a mirror. And then i think to myself why don't they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every little place a new name? What would it change? It is mirage; the whole thing is a mirage. How can anyone divide a memory? (SL 246-47)

Freedom, then is a 'mirage'. If freedom were possible through killings, then Tridib's death would have set him free. But the fact is that a chance remark by a waiter in a restaurant sets his hand shaking like a leaf, fifteen years after the gruesome act, thousands of miles away in another continent. Even the division and subdivision of the continent cannot change the dismal situation.

CONCLUSION

The various sections of *The Shadow Lines* reiterate that personal freedom is curiously connected with political realities that are often divisive and disruptive; and, so, no freedom is unequivocal. Freedom for one set of people is attained at the cost of others and thus notions of freedom are both vague and shadowy, no truth is every objective and no freedom unconditional. Notions of liberty are like shadow lines, sometimes shadowy and mirage-like, but often, real and rigidly drawn. The borders or the shadow lines are not always possible to perceive from the window of a plane but they are impossible to transgress without causing violence and bloodshed.

The contradictions inherent in the term 'nation' are projected through the complex form of this novel. Although the nation is crucial to the conceptualization, scope and structure of *The Shadow Lines*, somewhere along the way it becomes an elusive and shadowy entity, as the principal protagonists in the drama are unable to make sense of its resonant contradictions. The grandmother who had passionately clung on to her space in the historical narrative, and who understands the forces of history-seeing them as catalysts of social change, is dead; and the

younger persons in the novel are unwilling to take on the mantle at this stage. They want to be individuals rather than be aggressive citizens, with unconditional allegiance to the nation-state. Ila, Robi and the narrator-different versions of the post-colonial Indian, try to grapple with the reality in their own diverse way. Although they believed the boundaries between nations to be the shadow lines, they found them precipitating divisiveness and violence.

The structure of the novel is a complex jigsaw puzzle carefully crafted with its pieces seemingly strewn about with haphazard randomness. Both the narrator and the reader discover through this artistic form that the world is not a simple place that can be seen in an atlas. Though the solid lines that divide the nations may not be clearly visible, they are in fact an inexorable fact, as they lead to political aggression and violent bloodshed.

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