

Postcolonial Nation in *The Shadow Lines* of Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh is one of the well known novelists of contemporary Indian Writings in English. He gained popularity with his debut novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986) and received Sahitya Akademi Award for his second novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988). Ghosh is known for his artistic style and the themes he chooses. He brings out historical, political, social and cultural issues in his novels. *The Shadow Lines* is one such novel where Ghosh links the private lives of the individuals with the history of the nation and public events. It is a multilayered novel with non –linear narration in which Ghosh questions the division of people with borders. The present paper attempts to delineate the concept of nation and nationalism from postcolonial perspective with special reference to *The Shadow Lines* novel of Amitav Ghosh. Nation, nationality, national identity and nationalism have been the significant themes of many postcolonial novels written in English including native and diasporic writers.

Keywords: Nation, Postcolonialism, Subjugation, Nationalism, Modernity

Introduction

'Postcolonialism' is one of the significant modern theories. It reached momentum with the publication of *Orientalism* in 1978 by Edward Said. It analyses the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer. Initially, it dealt with anti-colonial aspects and tried to project and revive the native culture. Over a period of time post-colonialism increased its horizons to include feminism, environmentalism, Dalit literature, gay literature etc. Nation, nationality, national identity and nationalism have been the significant themes of many postcolonial novels written in English. Amitav Ghosh is one of the contemporary postcolonial novelists who deals with the themes related to India, hybridity, multiculturalism, nation and national identity. *The Shadow Lines* is one such novel that deals with postcolonial aspects like nation.

Postcolonial Nation in *The Shadow Lines*

The Shadow Lines (1988) is the second novel of Amitav Ghosh for which he received Sahitya Akademi award. Ghosh uses memory as a narrative technique in this novel. The plot of the novel deals with three generations. It reminds us the situations in the colonial and postcolonial periods. The novel is written in two parts i.e. Going Away and Coming Home. The story is revealed through the unnamed narrator. Private lives of the individuals are linked to the history i.e. history is retold through the individuals and families represent nations. There are references to postcolonial Indian incidents like War with China, India - Pakistan war, formation of Bangladesh; and communal riots etc. As the title itself suggests Amitav Ghosh questions the necessity of dividing the countries on the basis of geography. He tries to advocate that physical borders cannot divide the people, in fact. Their cultural roots are important than the physical borders. Meenakshi Mukherjee in her *The Perishable Empire* says, "*The Shadow Lines* obviously questions the idea of nationhood that is consolidated through the baptism of wars or coercive state apparatus. The grandmother valorizes apocalypses that make 'people forget that they are born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood'" (Mukherjee: 146).

Amitav Ghosh in a way advocates the nationalism proposed by Renan who considers that "A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. It presupposes a part, it is summarized however, in the present by a tangible fact, namely, consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life" (Renan in Bhabha: 19). According to Renan determination of a man or a nation is superior to geography, language, religion or culture. All these play an important role in constructing and imaging a nation and he says "mountains and rivers can't be the national borders" (Renan in Bhabha: 19). This is evident from the characters he created in the novel. For instance, in *The Shadow Lines* when Tha'mma wanted to go to Dhaka after partition she asks the narrator's father whether she can witness the border, "she wanted to know whether she would be able to see the border between India and East

Pakistan from the plane” (TSL: 151). She says “surely there’s something – trenches perhaps, or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land” (TSL: 151) to identify the nations.

She further questions “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 use 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?” (TSL: 151). Through this it is believed that Tha’mma expects the concrete borders and dividing lines between the nations like when their ancestral house was divided into two by her father and Jethamoshai.

Amitav Ghosh, in fact, through the character of the narrator’s father questions the physical borders and articulates that the border is in the airport itself that she has to fill the forms and other required formalities. “This is the modern world. The border isn’t 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” (TSL: 151)

Tha’mma, narrator’s grandmother is one of the major characters in the novel. Her presence is prevalent in both colonial and postcolonial periods. She is also depicted as the patriot who keenly follows the happenings of national movement. She was born in Dhaka before independence and later after the demise of her husband in 1935 she moved to Calcutta, thus experiencing the life on both sides of the border. She has the comparative understanding of nation in colonial and post-colonial period. She supports the cause of freedom struggle and was ready to sacrifice for the nation.

Thamma’s nationalist ideology is found when she says about a boy in college with her in Dhaka. She says “he always sat as far back as possible in the lecture room and since he never said anything, nobody took much notice of him Then one morning, when they were halfway through a lecture, a party of policemen arrived, led by an English officer and surrounded the lecture room” (TSL 36-37). She was grown in the period of extreme nationalism. She compares Robi with the boy who fought during the freedom struggle. She was aware of the secret terrorist societies like Anusilan and Jungantar and their work. She was very much inspired by the nationalists and freedom fighters and was also ready for fight.

Thamma feels that if Robi had been in that place, he would have stood them like that young bearded extremist nationalist. She says that the boy was associated with secret terrorist societies since the of fourteen and he used to exercise with them in their gym, using pistols, making bombs etc. He was given the task of assassinating an English magistrate in Khulna district. But before that police came to know about this plan. Amitav Ghosh through the character of Tha’mma tries to project the

ideas of narrow nationalism with borders and the feelings for the nation. Thamma was ready to sacrifice for the nation and feels proud to serve the nationalist heroes. After hearing the heroism of Khudiram Bose and death of Bagha Jatin, she wanted to do something to the terrorists. Work for them in a small way and get the glory of them a little bit. At least by helping them in cooking, washing clothes etc. shows the affinity towards nation, nationhood and identity.

The strong feeling of nationalism is seen in Thamma, as she says, “if only she had been working with him, she would have warned him somehow, she would have saved him, she would have gone to Khulna with him too and stood at his side, with a pistol in her hands, waiting for that English magistrate” (TSL : 39). She was even ready to join the terrorist group for the sake of nation. She says “it was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be” (TSL: 39). As a strong nationalist, she wanted to get out from clutches of British rule. ‘Our’ indicates part of a larger community sharing common interest.

But we can see the transition in the character of Tha'mma when she goes to Dhaka, the place of her birth, to bring her Jethamoshai to India and where she has witnessed the death of Tridib. She feels that she has become non-native in her own place of birth when she says, “Yes, really I'm a foreigner here – as foreign as May in India or Tagore in Argentina” (TSL: 195). It is because of partition and formation of a new country even with her roots she couldn't become native there. Initially, as a conservative nationalist Thamma wanted to have borders between the nations/countries. But later she realized that borders are only imaginary.

After the partition of their ancestral house, grandmother used to “make up stories about that part of the house. Everything's upside – down over there, I'd tell her, at their meals they start with the sweets and end with the dal, their books go backwards and end at the beginning, they sleep under their beds and eat on the sheets, they cook with jhatas and the sweet with their ladles” (TSL: 125). But, later when she visited the house after going back to Dhaka, she and her sister witnessed that everything same as their house i.e. nothing upside – down. This is the realization in the character of Tha'mma and Ghosh pronounces that when you look closer at the other side of the border, things will be clear and we can find that people on the other side of the border are also same as the people of this side. That is why he has used the metaphor ‘looking glass mirror’.

Amitav Ghosh brings out the issue of national identity through the character of Ila. Ila always wants to get away from her native country i.e. India. Since her childhood she was living abroad and travelling in different parts of the world. She prefers to follow western culture and mannerism. She tries to get an identity and recognition in a foreign country but ends up in not belonging anywhere. Of course through the character of Ila, Ghosh attempts to question and criticize the postcolonial national happenings or the devastated dreams of India after independence. In one incident at a night

club, she says that she has chosen to live in London because she wanted to be free, free from conservative Indian culture. She says “Free of you! She shouted back. Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you” (TSL: 89). Like a country which needs freedom from colonial rulers, Ila also wanted to have her individual freedom by choosing to stay in London and by imbibing the western culture. By giving this illustration, Ghosh criticizes the growing intolerance in the country in the name culture and religion.

Ghosh makes it clear through the character of Tridib that borders are shadowy lines and we should think beyond borders. Tridib’s character represents cosmopolitanism and trans-nationalism. He uses his imagination very much to understand the cosmopolitanism. Of course, Ghosh himself experienced the life abroad in different countries and widely travelled.

Ghosh tries to promote the cosmopolitan world through Tridib imagines “beyond the limits of one’s mind to their times and other places and even, if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one’s image in the mirror” (TSL: 29). According to Ghosh, borders are the imaginary geographical lines and this is evident from the very title of the novel *The Shadow Lines* which has many underlying meanings. Though he questions the nation and the violence that took place after the partition of the country, Ghosh is not against the nation.

Tridib is a symbol of cosmopolitanism. Through his imagination he goes to different places. Ghosh wants to reiterate that the borders are not physical. There should be good relations and movement among the countries. “He gave himself up; it was a sacrifice, though real sacrifice is a mystery” (TSL: 277) is the symbol of humanism.

Amitav Ghosh uses love and friendship as symbols of connecting the people and countries. This is evident from the relationship of the English family, the Prices and Datta- Chaudharies of Bengal. In the later part the love and marriage between Ila and Nick Price is a symbol of overcoming the cultural gaps and suggesting the cosmopolitanism. Another case is the love between Tridib and May Price. Though it could not last long with the sudden death of Tridib, Amitav Ghosh wanted to showcase the cosmopolitanism. In fact, Tridib sacrificed his life to protect the lives of May, Khalil and Jethamoshai. “You are my love, my own true love, my love across –the – seas” (TSL: 193) symbolizes that good relations with people and countries are important. Thus, Ghosh advocates the transcendental love that beyond borders.

‘Travel’ is another symbolic representation that Ghosh used to advocate cosmopolitanism. The movement of the major characters like Tridib, Narrator, Ila, May Price and Thamma among Calcutta, London and Dhaka is the symbol of blurring borders. Even the conservative nationalist Thamma also travels to the places like Mandalay etc. Journey across the borders is another example for the lessening importance given to the borders.

Ghosh advocates humanism in the novel. Post riot period, there are many refugees from either sides of the border. There are Muslims in East Pakistan who took care of a Hindu for instance, Khalil, a rickshaw puller, who takes care of Jethamoshai. Ghosh is against the coercive borders and division of the people. When the narrator tries to imagine a city near the periphery of the circle he ends up in saying “None, that is other than war. It seemed to me then that within this circle there were only states and citizens; there were no people at all” (TSL: 233). By criticizing the wars between the nations, Ghosh proclaims that the people are important than the states, countries and borders.

Ghosh promotes that physical borders cannot separate the people with same history, culture and identity. History and culture are important components of constructing a nation. Ghosh meant borders are the shadow lines and they are of no use. He says that “each city is an inverted image of the other” (TSL: 233). Ghosh states that the people can’t be divided based on the borders. It is evident from the text that “They had drawn their borders believing in that pattern, in the enchantment of lines, hoping perhaps once they had etched their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of the prehistoric Gondwanaland” (TSL:233)

Yet another incident in the novel that Ghosh advocates about the futility of the borders when Jethamoshai rejects Thamma’s offer to take him to India. It is only for political benefits and leads to some kind of hatred among the people. This in fact does not separate the people. When Tha’mma tries to persuade Jethamoshai to move with her to India, he says “I don’t believe in India – Shindia... Suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? No one will have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here and I’ll die here” (TSL: 215). For him, borders are only the lines and they are of no use.

To conclude it can be perceived that borders are the ‘shadowy lines’ and nothing will change even if thousands of lines are drawn through the subcontinent and give a new name to every place. “It’s a mirage; the whole thing is a mirage. How can anyone divide a memory? (TSL: 247) asks Amitav Ghosh. Humanism is superior to anything else; and the narrow perspective of nation and nationalism should be dismantled by encouraging globalism and cosmopolitanism.

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