

Debunking the Myth of Nation: A Counter Discourse by Amitav Ghosh in the Shadow Lines

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Abstract:

*Amitav Ghosh, like other postcolonial writers, does not believe in boundaries and considers them as human-constructed and arbitrary. But unfortunately modern system of political thinking has naturalized and gives validity to these borders. Ghosh, in his interview with John Hawley, says that these lines and boundaries are drawn merely to manipulate one's life and thinking. Therefore, they must be ignored. The concept and feeling of belongingness to one particular nation or state separate people from one another. There exists a line of distinction between them which is based on culture, religion, race and language differences. Here in the present study Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* interrogates and deconstructs the actual existence and validity of boundaries (be it social, cultural, political, economic, linguistic or so on) strengthen by power structures. He describes the blurring nature of boundaries by naivety of the grandmother. Within the postcolonial context, every country lives in association with another and cannot live in isolation from the outside world. Therefore Ghosh through his novel *The Shadow Lines* mocks at the separatists' view of establishing divisions by creating lines among nations, because these lines are merely imaginary or shadow lines.*

Key Words:

Boundaries; Nationalism; Power structure; national Identity; Internationalism; Cosmopolitanism; Blurredness.

Kincaid asserts, "Every native of every place is a potential tourist, and every tourist is a native of somewhere." (*A Small Palace* 18) and this idealist vision of borders and boundaries is well adopted by Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines*. He is of the opinion that it does not matter or it does not give any pride to any nation if that nation is divided into different states and territories. This even does not change the well being of people. As the title of the book *The Shadow lines*, suggests that all lines are shadow lines; they are just illusionary in nature and have no existence in reality. These lines are human constructed and are shallow and unjustifiable. He, through interrogation of borders, lines and boundaries, questions the relevance and validity of the concept of nation hood. Ghosh is of the opinion that no doubt, boundaries are true and separate one from the rest of the world but this does not restrict one's movement across the border. People can freely move from one country to another. It does not matter from which country they really belong to. So, these lines are mere an illusion present in our psychology and have no existence in reality. Thus by interrogating the concept of borders and lines Ghosh questions the concept of nationalism, as nationalism which is a belief or political identity where people identify them with or attach to one single nation.

Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* describes nationalism as a force of destruction and a threat to world peace. "Devotion to one's own nation; patriotic feeling, principles

or efforts” is the definition of nationalism as proposed by Oxford Dictionary. The definition of nationalism as given by Tha'mma in *The Shadow Lines* is not very different from the above definition. Through this the novel raises serious issues related to the concept of nationalism. Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* undermines or describes nationalism in a weaker or less effective manner by questioning History, the official version of History on which the idea of nation is constructed. For better understanding of novel and its relation to nationalism, one has to read and begin the novel by analyzing Tha'mma's concept of nationalism. As Hutchinson and Smith well described the concept of nationalism as:

Nationalism was, first of all, a doctrine of popular freedom and sovereignty. The people must be liberated that is free from any external constraints, they must determine their own destiny and be masters in their own house; they must control their own resources, they must obey only their 'inner' voice. But that entailed fraternity. The people must be united; they must divide all internal divisions; they must be gathered together in a single historic territory, a homeland; and they must have legal equality and share a public culture. (*Nationalism* 4)

Thamma's notion of nationalism consists of above mentioned characteristics of nationalism and this feeling of nationalism is deep rooted in her due to her struggle against colonialism and her desire to free from colonial power. She even does not hesitate in killing the English magistrate in her struggle against colonialism. As she stated: “yes I would have killed him, it was for our freedom: I would

have done any thing to be free” (*The Shadow Lines* 39). As a true nationalist, she wants to keep her country, keep her nation free from colonial power and urges for the freedom of her own nation. Tha'mma, here represents a true picture of liberal nationalists who are of the view that individuals in order to lead a meaningful and autonomous lives, should do anything for their struggle against colonial power and freedom so that they gain their national identity. Sacrifice for the country is her prime motive in life and is the ultimate unifying force in strengthening the unity of force in strengthening the unity of nation. The use of word 'our' is significant throughout the novel in the sense that it describes the fact that Tha'mma is aware of the fact that she is a part of a large community and serving a common interest. She is always trying to strengthen the unity of country and this is well reflected in the novel where she as headmistress once determines that “every girl who opted for Home Science ought to be taught how to cook at least one dish that was a specialty of some part of the country other than her own. It would be a good way, she thought, of teaching them about the diversity and vastness of the country” (114) and in another incident in the novel when she states “People forget that they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood” (76). Thus, both the incidents in the novel reflects Thamma's concept of nationalism. She urges for national identity and freedom from colonial owner. She is of the opinion that in order to gain national identity one should not restrict oneself to a particular state or territory rather should come forward as 'a citizen of the world' and not as 'a citizen of the state'.

For Thamma, as a result of partition one nation is different and opposite from other nation and this point is well illustrated in the novel where Ghosh talks about the partition of her ancestral house in Dhaka. The house across

the partition line functions as an opposite to Thamma's house. According to Thamma, Everything opposite to their house happens in the house across the partition line. Similar is her thinking for nation. She believes that the opposite happens across the borders. She draws a psychological as well as physical boundary around herself and those who claim the same national identity. This is the only reason that she is very cautious of any 'Indian' who lives beyond the borders. This behavior of her is well reflected in her statement for Ila who is not living in India but in England and Thamma claims that under the influence of England she becomes "a greedy little slut" (78) and in the incident when she really wants to bring back home the poor old men. This feeling is not due to any family bondage or family feeling but is due to her feeling of nationalism. She stated: "I'm worried about him, poor old man, all by himself, abandoned in that country Imagine what it must be to die in another country, abandoned and alone in your old age" (134-36).

Thamma's nationalism in *The Shadow Lines* is the results of her attachment and bondage for the place of her birth thus fall under the category of Primordial nationalist, which according to Paul R. Brass is: "every person carries with him through life "attachments" derived from place of birth, kinship relation, religion, language and social practices that are natural for him, 'spiritual' in character and they provide a basis for an easy 'affinity' with the people from the same background" (69). But in the novel, there are certain complications with the above mentioned view, like, Thamma as an ardent nationalist unable to understand and find "how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality (149). Moreover, with the partition of Bengal, she becomes foreigner in her birth place Dhaka. Before flying to Dhaka she asks her son if she would be able to see the borders between India and

East Pakistan from the plane" (148). These incidents in the novel show the ignorant nature of Thamma from the real meaning of nationalism because she as a staunch nationalist has a very narrow understanding of nationalism and concept of boundaries. Even her son laughs at her narrow remark for boundaries between nations. He taunts her if "she thought that the border was a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other side it was on the school atlas". She tells him, "But surely there's something- trenches perhaps, or soldiers or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land. Don't they call it no-man's-land?" (148) and in this course of her conversation she ends up with the fundamental idea of nationalism where she states:

"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 the sides will be the same; it'll be just side 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 were it for all then the partition and the killing and everything if there's not something in between? (149).

Thus, by throwing light on the aftermaths of partition, the novel shows that even after partition there might not be "difference" between two regions, two states across the border. In this way, Ghosh questions the ideology of nationalism (which urges for single national identity).

On the other hand, the new generation in the novel, as represented by narrator (under the influence of Tridib's ideology of nationalism) and narrator's cousin, adopt new version of nationalism and freedom. They believe in internationalism. For Ila, freedom

means liberty from the restrictive customs that restricts the individual's movements and activities. In her eyes, nationalism does not mean to think only for our own country's development but to think for the development of the whole world, which is known as internationalism. This development is not due to freedom from colonial power or external force or evil or struggle for our belongingness but freedom from the internal forces or evil i.e. the restrictive customs and traditions. Thus Ila, as a product of colonialism, rejects her past, her community and attracted towards the colonizers and adopts their religion, languages, customs.

Narrator, too on the other hand, undercuts the Thamma view of nationalism. He is of the view that even after partition the two cities, Dhaka and Calcutta, are seen as an inversed image of each other. The narrator by questioning the official version of history undermines the ideology of nationalism and the whole idea of nation-state revolves around the single fact i.e. 'History' because nationalism nourishes itself on past glories. In *The Shadow Lines* the narrator juxtaposes history with memory and imagination because with the memory and imagination one is able to create a new version of history. Tridib had once advised the narrator that "we could not see without inventing what we saw, so at least we could try to do it properly.... We had to try because the alternative was not blackness- it only meant that if we didn't try ourselves, we could never be free of other people's inventions" (31). With his imagination and memory, he flights to any country or any nation without being restricted by lines and boundaries. According to him, these lines and boundaries are only the illusionary boundaries created by humans who are insubstantial and these illusionary lines limit the vision of people. Both Tridib and narrator (inspired by Tridib) have transcended the narrow vision of boundaries by their imagination and memory. These boundaries are

shown to be immaterial as they cannot limit the sights and scenes of the world and the immaterial nature of boundaries are shown in the incident when an event in Kashmir results in the riots in Dhaka and even the people not belonging to Dhaka are also killed by the communal riots. This event does not trigger any sort of communal riots in the places near to the Kashmir but it causes tensions in a land that is quite a long way away and also with an intervening boundary. The author may be trying to say that the causes of events are not merely the lines that separate them but are influenced by emotional bonding and relationships among people across the lines. So, the lines that separate are illusionary have no significance in the real life. They are immaterial, unsubstantial and human constructed.

The novel by giving the illusionary nature of lines and boundaries, demonstrates the cordial relationship among people across international borders. These borders no doubt, created distances but if one analyzes it from closer, then, one can understand that there are no distances in reality. Thus, by interrogating the concept of boundaries, Ghosh, in *The shadow Lines*, questions the concept of nationalism. He criticizes the narrow vision of nationalism by giving the concept of globalism and cosmopolitanism and further opines that it is only by removing all types of borders and boundaries that citizens of a particular nation or a country become people with same emotions and feelings. As Martin Heidegger has rightly said in "Building, Dwelling, Thinking": "A boundary is not at which something stops, but, as the Greek recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing." (154)

To conclude, in an overall assessment of *The Shadow Lines*, the porous quality of borders in a globalized world is explored which is a source of material advancement and intellectual adventure. In the novel, borders and

lines are shown as illusionary lines that have no existence in reality and by showing the illusionary nature of borders; author questions the concept of nationalism as the novel celebrates the secular ideal of heterogeneous Indian nation.

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