

THE FRAGILE CONSTRUCTS OF NATIONHOOD IN *THE SHADOW LINES*

Anu Shukla

Professor

Department of English

CDLU Sirsa, Haryana

ABSTRACT

*This paper critically examines the concepts of nation and nationality in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* within the framework of postcolonial theory. It explores the constructed nature of nationalism, as argued by theorists such as Ernest Renan and Benedict Anderson, and how Ghosh's narrative challenges these conventional notions. By analyzing the novel's fragmented structure, interwoven timelines, and the experiences of *Tha'mma* and *Tridib*, this study underscores the illusory and often violent consequences of national boundaries. The paper also interrogates the socio-political implications of partition, arguing that Ghosh deconstructs the traditional understanding of nationhood as a stable and homogenous entity.*

Keywords: *Nation, Nationality, Postcolonialism, Partition, Amitav Ghosh, The Shadow Lines, Nationalism, Identity, Boundaries, Historical Memory.*

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Raymond Williams in his book *Towards 2000* states that "nation as a term is radically connected with 'native'. We are born into relationship which are typically settled in a place" (180). This statement is also in tandem with the etymological meaning of the term 'Nation', which is also the derivative of the term 'Nationality'. But these very terms 'Nation' and 'Nationality' become flapdoodle in Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. The answer to this shift in the denotation of these differently connoted terms is not neoteric but can be dated back as early as 1882 and credited to French Orientalist Ernest Renan who was aware that

...nations are not 'natural entities', and the instability of the nation is the inevitable consequence of its nature as a social construction. This myth of nationhood, marked by ideology, perpetuates nationalism, in which specific identifiers are employed to create exclusive and homogeneous conceptions of national traditions. Such signifiers of homogeneity always fail to represent the diversity of the actual 'national' community for which they purport to speak, and, in practice, usually represent and

consolidate the interest of the dominant power groups within any national formation.(qtd. in Ashcroft et al., 167)

Amitav Ghosh, it seems, without attending to the dominant power groups, has to his advantage, fully exploited this idea to create an excellent partition novel highlighting the absurdity of a nation bounded by equally absurd cartographic demarcations and the consequent ‘Nationality’. Ghosh’s statement in *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* that “All boundaries are artificial: there is no such thing as a ‘natural’ nation, which has journeyed through history with its boundaries and ethnic composition intact”(100) is very apt in this context. The concepts ‘Nation’ and ‘Nationality’, have been re-narrated by Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* in as complicated a manner as the crisscrossing lines of the family tree of the novel’s storyline; the story is about an unnamed narrator and his grandmother Tha’mma and about Tha’mma and her sister Mayadebi, about Mayadebi and her sons Tridib and Robi, and about Tridib and the Price family and so on.

The two sections of *The Shadow Lines* are titled ‘Going Away’ and ‘Coming Home’. The dilemma of Tha’mma in going away from her nation India and still coming home to her nation (Dhaka), her place of birth, is what the central line of the story is. In the words of Meenakshi Mukherjee it is “indicating paradoxically the difficulty of people who have been displaced from their homes, of separating the two verbs of movement” (138-149).

Ghosh tries to interrogate the existing and prevalent notions of nation, nationality and freedom. In an interview he says, “Today nationalism, once conceived as form of freedom, is really destroying our world. It is destroying the forms of ordinary life that many people know. The Nation-State prevents the development of free exchange between peoples (qtd. in Wassef,75-95)”. It is very pertinent to observe here that Salman Rushdie was the pioneer of a long descendent of writers in the beginning of the 80’s to put the concept of Nationalism under scanner and in the rejection of it till now accepted meaning. The story, in terms of chronology, begins in 1939 with Mayadebi, her husband and Tridib going to England climaxing in Tha’mma, May and Tridib’s going to East Pakistan and Tridib getting killed in a communal riot, erupting because of the Mu-I-Mubarak from Hazratbal Mosque in Kashmir, which though is retrieved and reinstated very quickly. Though partition never gets directly addressed in the novel, but it looms large in the background. The novel presents a critique of the partition and its aftermath. The author states on the jacket blurb of the novel that the story’s “... focus is the meaning of political freedom in the modern world and the force of nationalism, the shadow lines that we draw between people and nations which is both an absurd illusion and a source of terrifying violence...”. The author questions the validity and the necessity of partition. A little detour into the prevailing politics of those times would help us understand the author’s viewpoint. Partition may have eclectic sources, but one of the major foundations was- the two-nation theory, which was put forth by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and pushed forward by Jinnah. And the implied meaning that led to the basis of the partition was a strange misconception of an idea which was propagated for showing the unity in the diversity concept of Indian culture. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan described Hindus and Muslims as the two eyes of a newly

married girl and his implications were secular as he wanted to emphasize – two eyes but one vision. Jinnah misconstrued it into Hindus and Muslims are two separate cultural entities (nation) and thus they should be two different States. Again closer examination of the implications of the term in context of India's Partition shows that how it is an hermeneutically improbable and thus led to an historical mistake. The State involves hermetic geographical boundaries, which were not feasible in this case. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, what we tend to forget is that the term 'nation' refers to an entity that is a cultural and it did not originate in Indian sub-continent, and was imported from Europe. It is an imperial term, which was first used by famous Joan of Arc who said, " France for the French, England for the English, Italy for the Italians, Spain for the Spanish, and so forth.(Sc IV)", as presented by G B Shaw in *Saint Joan*. The roots of this controversial term lie in the Eurocentric cultural ethos. Why is it that a person like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, who in a speech in 1883 said that, "I say with conviction that if we to disregard for a moment our conception of God head then in all matters of everyday Hindus and Muslims really belong to one nation, and the progress of the nation is possible only if we have a union of hearts, mutual sympathy and love"(qtd. in Rajurkar, 34-53). But later on he changed his stance and in 1887 in Lucknow said that the Hindus and Muslims were two different nations and that the Muslims should depend on the British for their advancement. The same stands true to Jinnah, who was called the 'ambassador' of Hindu- Muslim unity by no less a person than Sarojini Naidu, changed suddenly. The British motivation behind the shift of these two central figures is yet to be unearthed and sure to be found. The adamancy of the Indian National Congress and the ego clash between Nehru and Jinnah is also not unknown. So contrary to the established fact that the two-nation theory was a camouflage propagated by the British and played on by Muslim league, it was in fact a divisive strategy employed by the Empire to further their long cherished 'divide-and-rule' and the leaders of both the communities could not look at the larger picture, being fixed in the custody of their personal ambitions.

The absurdity of two nation theory can be seen in the fact that the basis on which it was formed shifted its stance. P.C.Mathur states "The theological inexactitude and inconsistency of 'Pakistan-for-Muslims only' approach was highlighted, ironically, by Muslim theologians themselves led by Maulana Maudoodi, who opposed the Muslim league demands precisely on the ground that territorial delimitation of Muslim was a theological absurdity"(435-443). If we are to believe the two-nation theory, then why eventually Bangladesh came into being is a pertinent question to ponder. Ghosh questions this unnecessary partition in *The Shadow Lines*, which was not because of a mass popular reason, but because of the political manipulation of the dominant power groups. The rubbish and stupid notion of partition on communal lines is further highlighted by Ashcroft et al in the statement,

In Pakistan whole communities descended from those Urdu speaking Indian Muslims who emigrated from India to Pakistan (known as Muhajirs) are still being identified as a separate group even after more than half a century, though they were seeking to form a single national group with their co-religionists on the basis of the call for a separate Muslim

nation. Similarly, many of the Hindus who fled from East Bengal across the border into India, in 1947 are still awaiting Indian Citizenship....(194)

On the Western side the immigrated populace is called 'refugees' even today. Ashcroft et al. further state that "partition did not produce... stable separate nationhoods that its colonial architects claimed it was designed to ensure and the people of both the countries are still living with the conflicts that resulted from it..." (195).

Partition is for gaining freedom in the form of a separate nation. A Nation is the extended identity and the self of an individual. A division of the soul or the self is a painful and unaccepted reality and cannot bring freedom or happiness. Thus the resulting nation or nationality is a mirage which appears to be there but is not. Tridib asserts by saying, "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's a mirage: the whole thing is a mirage. How can anyone divide a memory?"(247), but perhaps to the intoxicated heads delirious of the crown, it gave some personal satisfaction, and politicians seldom care for the masses.

Ghosh metaphorically mocks the partition of the nation in an incident where Tha'mma remembers the partition of their ancestral home in Dhaka right through a doorway, a lavatory bisecting a commode and a nameplate. Tha'mma is puzzled to know that there are no trenches on the border that divide the countries. She says, "And if there is no difference both sides will be the same; it'll be just like it used to be before,... what was it all for then- partition and all the killing and everything- if there isn't something in between?" (151). A nation is not created by geographical demarcations. It is, as Renan puts, "a spiritual principle" and that the creation of such a spiritual principle is not dependent on "... race, language, material interest, religious affinities, geography, and military necessity" (18-19), he further states that the nation is a moral conscience created by a large aggregate of men, healthy in mind and warm of heart.

The common people don't believe in a nation created by partition and violence and thus Jethamoshai says to Tha'mma that he does not believe in India-shindia. He reasons it out by saying that, "... but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere" (215).

Because of the absurdity of the nation, the term nationality also becomes questionable. Tha'mma' and many more like her have Pakistan, or Bangladesh or India as their nation, i.e. their birthplace, but after the partition their nationality has changed. So when Tha'mma is travelling to Dhaka she gets confused as to whether she is going or coming, causing her grandson to laugh and make fun in his innocence well placed in a decision which may have been politically correct but culturally wrong. Thomas' concept of the Nation and Nationhood surprisingly lies in the colonial powers of the Empire, she says, "They know they are a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood... 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"(78).

When Tha'mma comes to know of Jethamoshai living in Bangladesh, she decides to rescue "her uncle from his enemies and bringing him back where he belonged, to her invented country"(137). The enemies who were at one point of time her nation brethren, the nation to which she belonged but now which is alien to her. Her nation or her "place of Birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality"(152). But this very enemy nation becomes her home as she, when about to go to Jindbahar lane, changes her dress three times in her excitement and when questioned about her anxiety she retorts, " I am going home as a widow for the first time"(205).

Nation, nationality and nationalism are further defied by the author by presenting the people on the other side of the divide as humane in the true sense of the word. Jethamoshai is well looked after by Khalil and his family under no compulsion. Khalil is not happy at the prospect of Ukil babu going away with Tha'mma. For Jethamoshai also his own people become foreigners while strangers become his family members. Khalil-Jethamoshai relation is a strong motif of the unity of the so called two separate nations. The mirage of nationalism is shattered like a piece of glass when the rioters attack and kill Jethamoshai along with Khalil and Tridib while Tha'mma knowing of the danger wants to drive away without extending any help to rescue her uncle- the very reason for which she undertook the visit to Dhaka.

How integrally national we are is pointed out the author in the incident of 1979 in the life of the narrator. His friends and he himself are surprised at how much they remember of the 1962 war with China. But interesting none except the narrator remembers the riots of January 1964, a much later event. Ghosh delineates in the novel as Pabitra Bharali states "riots and distances at the social and national level do not really budget any solution through the partition of the bigger nation-state"(44-46). While making the circles of reason on an old Atlas the narrator learns the meaning, or rather meaninglessness of distances and national boundaries. Empire deliberately tore the nation in two on the illogic of the twin - nation and started a well-planned domino effect that has already manifested into Bangladesh and Khalistan, Tamil Eelam, Sindh, and Gorkhaland have been trying to become separate nations.

In conclusion, I would just say that both the partitioned group interestingly blames each other for it and the Empire remains unblemished. The authentic voice can be heard in the writings of literatures who feel and live the society, the nation. Historians on the other hand limit themselves by the chains of circulation and sponsorship. Faiz beautifully sums up my emotion of this paper in lines written on the day of Independence:

ये दाग दाग उजाला, ये शबगज़ीदा सहर
वो इन्तज़ार था जिस का, ये वो सहर तो नहीं (Manish Kumar)

Translated from the Urdu by Agha Shahid Ali as:

These tarnished rays, this night-smudged light—
This is not that Dawn for which, ravished with freedom,

we had set out in sheer longing,...(Guju)

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