

Critiquing Nationalism in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract

*This paper is an attempt to find out the undertones of Nationalism in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. *The Shadow Lines* focuses on the narrator's family in Calcutta and Dhaka and their connection with an English family in London. The novel emphasizes the futility of borders between nations as etched out in maps, and of the frontiers policed by nation states that separate people, communities, and families. The novel reverberates the forms of violence that nationality and globalization manifest in home, in domestic spaces and in private lives in order to put forward in the public sphere the questions about gender, memory and belonging that South Asian nationalist history cannot answer.*

Keywords: Nationalism, Frontiers, Postcolonial, Globalization

The terms nation and nationalism despite their common usage, have always been enigmatic terms. The proliferation of theories like post-colonialism, multiculturalism, globalization and postmodernism have upheld or defied national identities and boundaries. We are living in the tempestuous uncertainties where on one hand the world is becoming footloose; on the other hand the same euphoric and hyped cosmopolitanism is hounded by the ghosts of pristine identities. The question of avoiding nations and nationalism and shifting obdurate identities are finding an echo in contemporary literature.

The term nationalism can refer to an ideology, a sentiment, a form of culture, or a social movement that focuses on the nation." Nationalism was, first of all a doctrine of popular sovereignty. The people must be liberated - that is free from any external constraints; they must determine their own destiny and be masters in their house; they must control their own resources; they must obey only their inner voice... The people must be united; they must dissolve all internal divisions; they must be gathered together in a single historic territory, a

homeland; and they must have legal equality and share a single public culture" (Hutchinson and Smith 4).

While there is significant debate over the historical origins of nations, nearly all specialists accept that nationalism is a modern phenomenon originating in Europe. Precisely where and when it emerged is difficult to determine but its development is closely related to that of the modern state and the push for the popular sovereignty that came to a head with the French revolution in the late 18th century. Since that time nationalism has become one of the most significant political and social forces in history, perhaps most notably a cause of both the First and the Second World Wars.

The Shadow Lines focuses on the narrator's family in Calcutta and Dhaka and their connection with an English family in London. The relationship between narrator's grandmother and her animosity towards her sister's granddaughter Ila emblemizes the conflict between nationalism and migrant cosmopolitanism, even as it makes visible the limits and failures of both these middle class women. *The Shadow Lines* is an extreme example of the tendency of crossing of frontiers -- especially those of nationality, culture and language. The novel focuses on nationalism, the shadow lines we draw between people and nations, which is both an absurd illusion and source of terrifying violence. *The Shadow Lines* sets out to uncover the confrontational, fearful, suppressed memories in an attempt to unsettle the simplified seamless narrative of national identity.

The unnamed narrator of *The Shadow Lines* comes in contact with different, often contradictory, versions of national and cultural identity through the main characters in the novel – his grandmother Tha'mma, his cousin Ila and his uncle Tridib and Robi. Growing up in a middle class professional family in Calcutta, the narrator acquires the sensibility of a metropolitan, bi-lingual, English speaking and a post-colonial subject. His interaction with his cousin and uncles whose fathers are globe-trotting diplomats and his own stint in London for research work make his attitude and approach to issues of nation and cultures more cosmopolitan. However, one of the most powerful influences on his life is his grandmother who is fiercely independent, militantly nationalist woman.

Tha'mma's settled convictions about nationality, religion and belonging start getting disturbed when she returns to her birth place in Dhaka, after a gap of many years, and for the first time after partition. She is startled when told that she would not be able to see any dividing distinction between India and East Pakistan from the plane since in the modern world borders are crossed within airports when disembarkation forms are filled out. The narrator says, "My grandmother's eyes widened and she slumped back in her chair... It had suddenly occurred to her that she would have to fill in 'Dhaka' as her place of birth on that form... and at that moment she had not been able quite to understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality" (155).

Tha'mma's perplexity is paradigmatic for millions of people on the sub continent, and it is an attempt to deal with this situation of being "messily at odds" that the discourse of nationhood places emphasis on the corporeality of space and distance, and places its faith in the infallibility of the shadow lines of borders. Functioning authentically to Tha'mma's ideology of linking religion and nationality to nationhood is her uncle who refuses to be rescued from the Muslim East Pakistan in order to live in India with his Hindu relatives. "I don't believe in this India-Shindia", he says, "it's all very well, you are going now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere...I was born here, and I'll die here"(216).

In contrast to Tha'mma nationalist militant fervor and hysteria, Ghosh presents the quiet strength and sanity of the narrator's uncle, Robi. He is an upright, principled, moral man who has not been swayed by socio-political pressures, but who is at the same time intrinsically Indian in his culture and values. Born in the post-colonial era, Robi grows up with the certitude of a unitary identity as a citizen of independent, secular India, and does not have to confront the necessarily fractured sense of self as do those who experienced decolonization and partition.

The senseless violence that kills Robi's brother and makes him victim to mob fury becomes part of his identity as post-colonial Indian. After relating the incident of Tridib's death, Robi articulates his formulation of freedom and nationhood, "Free... You know, if you look at the pictures on the front pages of the newspapers...dead people in Assam, the north east, Punjab, Sri Lanka, Tripura—people shot by terrorist and separatists and the army and the police,...everyone's doing it to be free...Why don't they draw thousands of little lines...and give every little place a new name? What would it change? ...How can anyone divide a memory?" (247).

Ghosh attempts a critique of the shadow lines of borders as signifiers of freedom and nationhood. Through his critique of Tha'mma's version of nationalism, and the naiveté of placing faith in national borders, and Robi's rejection of the dominant ideology of freedom, Ghosh points to the limitations of realizing identity through the discourse of the nationhood. He articulates the need to conceptualize issues of identity in terms of larger cultural and historical collectivities.

Ghosh seems to be indicating that Indian nationalism omitted the problematic issue of gender, not including it as an item on its agenda."How totally invisible the subjugation of women had been rendered in the ideology of liberal nationalism" (Tharu and Lalita 88). The general tendency, during the nationalist period, was to believe that universal suffrage would

automatically guarantee equality, and, until after independence Congress Party never made an effort to ensure electoral seats for women.

The Shadow Lines reveals the fragility of Partition's border between nations as etched out in maps, and of the frontiers policed by nation states that separate people, communities, and families. He suggests that the nature of boundaries understood through the metaphor of looking glass: the national border between the people of India and West Pakistan resembles the mirror's boundary in which self and reflected other are the same.

Thus, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* claims a unique position in the postcolonial literature that explores the hybridity of post-colonial nationality and migration. Ghosh, instead, points to the transnationality of community and memory through the critique of the gendered violence inflicted on minor bodies and minor lives by the structures and politics of both nationalism and globalization. As such, they are interventions that urge us to re-narrate national modernity as marked by the failure of state institutions and by the persistence of transnational memory and modes of community.

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