

## **REPRESENTATION OF THE NATION AND NATIONALISM: AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES***

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### **Introduction**

History generally defined is an account of past events in the realms of culture, politics or society, nation, literature, the arts and so on. History as a field of knowledge does not end in the consideration of the past, but continues in many ways with the present and future. By interpreting past events or by looking at images of the past, human beings reshape the present just as the future is decided by the present. History is a process that continues into the present and shapes the future.

Modern history has been constituted by the ideology of Nation and Nationalism. Many post-colonial writers during the last two decades have rigorously investigated the meaning of nation, nation-state and nationalism along with other narratives. Political analysts have pointed out that the nation is undoubtedly the most important political unit in the world today. The nation-state in its modern sense is "a political community differentiated from other such communities by virtue of its autonomy with regard to its legal codes and governmental structures, head of states, boundaries, system of military, defence etc." <sup>1</sup>. Yet, while the nation-state is one of the most important institutions in the modern world, the concepts of nation, nationality and nationalism, as Susie Tharu says, "... seem to lack coherence as concepts in political theory and are extremely difficult to describe or analyse" <sup>2</sup>.

It is generally agreed that nations and nationalism are European inventions which came into existence towards the end of the eighteenth century. For Rabindranath Tagore, "Nationalism turns into imperialism in the case of the West and Japan whereas in the case of India it is conceived primarily as a political movement for capture of power".<sup>3</sup> Dr. B.R. Ambedkar argued that "Nationality is a very elusive quality and can be understood only as a subjective psychological feeling".<sup>4</sup> Also to him, national feeling is a double-edged feeling as it is at once a fellowship for one's own and an anti-fellowship for those

who are not. The most remarkable and much discussed definition of the nation is Benedict Anderson's "The nation is an imagined political community. It is imagined because 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."<sup>5</sup> He elaborates that nations were not the determinate products of given sociological conditions such as language or race or religion. In Europe and everywhere else in the world, they have been imagined into existence. The making of the nation involves the shaping of a self and also the making of an other. Nations, like traditions, myths and works of art, are made, reshaped, recreated and imagined. In *Imaginary Home Lands*, Rushdie raises the fundamental question, "Does India exist?" For Rushdie, a nation does not exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will. The idea of India is a collective fantasy shared in varying degrees by Bengalis, Punjabis and Madrasis etc. Unlike Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh believes in the existence of the nation, but he too problematises the issues of borders and frontiers of the nations.

As an ideology born of modernity, nationalism has had a very destructive impact on the modern world. As Amitav Ghosh has said in an interview, "Today nationalism once conceived of as a 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"<sup>6</sup>. The destructive impact of nationalism and ideology as well as its nebulosity as a concept and as a state of mind have been recurrent concerns of Amitav Ghosh which I will discuss below.

Modern Indian history has been shaped not only by the ideology of the nationalism but also by the rise and growth of communal consciousness and communal conflict. Communalism, as it is understood in our political parlance today, originated in the late nineteenth century.

While we cannot deny that there were communal riots and struggles in the early history of India, those conflicts were primarily born of religious and ethnic differences and had hardly any political motivation behind them. The emergence of communalism in the nineteenth century India is a consequence of political mobilization of Hindus and Muslims as contending groups which was encouraged by the British colonial policy of divide and rule. One of the important instruments in this colonial policy was a certain interpretation of Indian history which reflected the political and ideological interests of Europe. Romila Thapar feels that communalism in the Indian context, "... is a consciousness which draws on a supposed religious identity and uses this as the basis for a political and social ideology".<sup>7</sup>

In this article I propose to consider this representation of Indian history as elaborated in *The Shadow Lines*. As a post-colonial writer, Amitav Ghosh has been immensely influenced by the history and politico-social milieu of the country. He provides an interpretation of the history of modern India in the light of current issues like those of the nation, nationalism, the partition and communal riots and violence. The novel presents the story of three generations of the narrator's family spread in three different nations Dhaka, Calcutta and London. In traveling across nations, countries and states, they yearn for a world without boundaries, without nation and without state. The characters of Amitav Ghosh, intermingle not as members of distinct cultures but as complex individuals in a world where geographical boundaries have truly become "Shadow Lines". These borders are mirrors that reflect not people's differences but their similarities. In terms of 'going away' and 'coming home' the novel beautifully shifts from past to present and from present to past. Ghosh manages in a masterly way time of two kinds. Time past i.e. memory and time present i.e. reality.

## 1. Representation of the Nation

### a. The Nation and its Boundaries

*The Shadow Lines* begins with an important year in the history of mankind, the year in which the second world war began:

In 1939, thirteen years before I was born, my father's aunt Mayadebi, went to England with her husband and her son Tridib.<sup>9</sup>

The narrator of the novel who was born in 1952 and who grew up in Calcutta discovered the world around him through the help of his uncle Tridib. Tridib points out to the narrator the places in Bartholomew's Atlas, while telling him stories, so that when the narrator moved out of Calcutta, his world had expanded to include many parts of the globe through hearing and reading about these places.

In the cellar scene, he surprises Nick and ILa with his revelations about London. He tells them the exact location of Sumatra Road, the place of air raid shelter, even mentioning the fact that Robi's mother and Mrs. Price along with uncle Alan have ducked into an air raid shelter on their back from Mill Lane when the high calibre bomb explodes there. All this remembering is due to the fact that the narrator has developed that aspect of mental faculty which is called imagination and which is instilled into him by his uncle Tridib, who could travel in his imagination all over the world even when he is in his small room in Calcutta. The narrator understands very well Tridib's contention that a place does not merely exist but it has to be invented in one's own imagination. Tridib tells the narrator:

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 wasn't blankness. It only meant that if we didn't try ourselves, we would never be free of other people's inventions. (31)

According to Tridib, there can be no invention without imagination. At the same time, it is absolutely necessary to use it with precision, with great care and responsibility. Based on this, the narrator learns to invent distant lands and places with the help of his uncle Tridib.

In contrast to the narrator is his cousin ILa, who is a globe-trotting woman but has not travelled at all as she lacked the power of imagination and memory to see the life in a story. As Tridib often says of her, the inventions she lives in moves with her, although she had been to many places, she had never travelled at all. It indicates that ILa had seen much but experienced nothing. The narrator could not persuade her to believe that a place does not merely exist but has to be invented in one's imagination.

In the second section of the novel, Ghosh applies the concept of 'Shadow Lines' to the Indian subcontinent in order to show the invented nature of the nation. This theme is brought out through the presentation of the Grandmother, who believes that the border is a solid and immutable reality. "The border was a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other like it was in a school Atlas." (15) Such a boundary line marks absolute differences between Dhaka and Calcutta for the Grandmother. She comments:

But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean where is the difference then? And if there is 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 them if there is not something between? (151)

Her son explains to her that the barriers will become clear enough once she goes through customs and then she will be required to state her nationality, and her place of birth. Grandmother believes that the nations have not only been made by boundaries but also that each nation has a clearly determined point of origin, represented by the country's war of liberation. She associates images of flesh and blood with the nation, perceiving it as a living body. She wants her grandson to become a good second-generation Indian citizen with a strong body, for without the strong bodies of individuals a strong nation cannot be formed.

However, Grandmother's fantasy of a strong powerful nation cannot sustain her for long. When she revisits her old home, Dhaka (now the capital of Bangladesh), to bring back her old uncle to her invented country, she realizes that her place of birth was messily at odds with her nationality. She also discovers that there are no lines or trenches or even soldiers standing along the border to confirm the lines drawn between India and East Pakistan in the maps of her mind. Not even a history of bloodshed and all those great wars can make them real and impermeable. As Suvir Kaul has stated, "Lines on map are the handiworks of administrators and cartographers and they do not mark much more than the will of the state."<sup>10</sup> Ghosh feels that these boundaries are like a mirror and they seem to reflect not their differences but their similarities. The

Shadow Lines underlines the fact that human kind everywhere is the same and in a world, where geographic boundaries have truly become 'Shadow lines. So, the novel exhibits the meaninglessness of boundaries even though for certain characters like Grandmother the nation has been demarcated by fixed boundaries.

#### **b. The Fictive Nature of History**

Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* deals with the theme of fictive nature of history. He shows how received history exists as much at the level of lived memory and imagination as at the level of objective record. For Ghosh, the nation as "an imagined community" too shares in this imaginative recollection. In this novel, Ghosh upholds the value and importance of imagination in the recreation of the past and establishes that there is no dividing line between historical reality and imaginative memory which is the experience of that reality. The narrator of the novel recollects with great precision the timing of many events of personal and public history: for example, the narrator turned ten in 1962, in the same year his father got promoted and his grandmother retired from the school where she had taught since 1939. Such precision is found not only in time but in recollection of places also. For example, the narrator's flat is at Gole Park and later on at the southern Avenue where they shifted. Opposite the lake Tridib lived in their family house at Bally gunge, the house of the Prices in 44 Lymington Road and the tube station is at West Hamstead.

In addition to evoking a number of places and times, *Shadow Lines* also presents a number of significant objects that represent the history of that age and are emblematic of the entire history of England of that time. The function of such objects is to represent in imagination and memory, the by-gone days of history which yet present themselves with vivid immediacy to the narrator after many years. By using this device of describing exact times, places and things, Ghosh links the narratives of the past and the present and authenticates the connection between the historical moment of second world war and the fictive world of the novel. The past is reconstructed through references to houses, photographs, maps, road names newspapers and other such concretizations. But it is nurtured by imagination. Although nations, religions, war, violence and

partition divide people, memory does not. Imagination creates a world that cannot be divided any more than nations break and float away when geographic boundaries are arbitrarily recreated.

The theme of the fictive nature of history is also evoked through the imagination of Tridib and the narrator. Tridib has an uncanny ability to look beyond time and space. Tridib prefers to travel in his imagination and create worlds for himself. However, though Tridib has got a strong imagination, he has never lived in the world of fantasy. He is much more contemptuous of fairy lands than anybody else could be.

Similarly, the narrator recaptures the fictive nature of history through the imagination as he sits in his flat in Calcutta, dreaming about faraway places. However, though both Tridib and the narrator comprehend the past in terms of memory and imagination, there are significant differences in their perception of history. Tridib immerses himself in historical events such as the start of the second World war in 1939 and the communal riots of Indian subcontinent in which he is murdered by communal fanatics. Unlike Tridib, the narrator is only minimally involved in the events, he describes, and hence reconstructs them partly from others' memories and partly from his own imagination. The narrator's insistent question, "Do you remember?" shapes his search for connections, for the recovery of lost information or repressed stories, for the details of great trauma or Joy that have receded into the archives of public or private memory. As the repository and archivist of family stories, stories told by his Grandmother, by Tridib, by Ila and finally by Robi and May, the unnamed narrator of *The Shadow Lines* is constantly engaged in the imaginative renewal of times, places, events and people of the past. This sort of remembering is often considered as longing for nostalgia, yet in each case it is fundamentally a search for meaning, for explanation and reasons to make sense of the past. Commenting on the interweaving of historical archive and imaginative memory in the narrative of this novel, Pallavi Gupta writes, "... as a work of imagination, the historian's work and the novelist's do not differ. Literary artists give us truer, because they are more honest, representations of the human experience of historical events than do historians themselves".<sup>11</sup> In this sense, *The Shadow Lines*

reveals the fictive nature of history in which the narrator recollects the past and the present in terms of imagination and memory.

### c. **The Nationalist Ideology at Work: Grandmother's Conception of Nationalism**

The role of nationalism in the making of modern history is under attack in *The Shadow Lines*. While it served a useful purpose during the freedom movement of India, the same cannot be said of nationalism in the post-independence India. According to Ghosh, though considered to be a very positive feeling, nationalism nourishes feelings of hatred and antagonism and leads to violence in post-colonial countries. If one wants to understand Ghosh's stance on nationalism, one has to analyse how Ghosh has presented the character of Thamma. Thamma is projected as a staunch patriot who was ready to give up her life to get freedom. Her conception of nationalism, nationhood and the formation of Indian state is shaped by her perception of her early days when she felt and experienced the tremors of British imperialism. In her desire to win political freedom, she dreamt of killing English officials. She even considered war as a necessary evil for furthering the cause of nationalism and strengthening the foundation of a nation.

Referring to Ila's stay in London, Thamma tells her grandson that Ila has no right to live in Britain since she does not belong there. "It took those people a long time to build that country - hundreds of years, years and years of wars and bloodshed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood: with their brother's blood and their father's blood and their son's blood. They know they are a nation because they have drawn their borders with blood. Regimental flags hang on all their cathedrals and their churches are lined with memorials of men who died in wars, all around the world, war is their religion".<sup>(78)</sup> She craves for war as she thinks that it would make people forget their differences whether they were Muslims or Hindus, Bengalis or Punjabis. "they become a family born of the same pool of blood".<sup>(78)</sup> Thamma's ideas here are couched in the language of post-colonial nationhood. which requires exclusive national pride. As a young girl, she had thought of fighting for freedom in East Bengal. But those very same people for whom she had been willing to lay down her life are enemies now. The feeling of nationalism

originally motivated them to fight against the British and Khulna. But in 1964 the group of Indians consisting of Grandmother, Tridib and May who were traveling in an embassy car are treated as enemies, haunted down and killed. It is the intense feeling of nationalism that brings about a tragedy in the lives of Tridib and May at personal level and for the families in general.

Born in Dhaka and separated from her place of her birth by the history of bloodshed and lines on a map, Grandmother is unable to distinguish between coming home and going home. The questions regarding coming and going involved here are two-fold. One is the actual process of coming and going and the other relates to national boundaries. The two are used in relation to home, a place of one's birth and upbringing, a place to which a person is deeply attached especially if one lives in another country. For grandmother, going away and coming home means crossing national frontiers and coming back to her own country. For her going means going to Dhaka and coming means coming to Calcutta. She thinks that the boundaries should have trenches perhaps or soldiers or guns pointing at each other or even just barren strips of land that would give an indication of the division of physical borders as it happened in the minds of the people of the subcontinent. The narrowness of grandmother's outlook reveals the limitation of nationalist ideology in the post-colonial context.

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