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BEYOND THE BORDERS: EXPLORING THE CONCEPTS OF NATION AND IDENTITY IN
AMITAV GHOSH'S "THE SHADOW LINES"

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ABSTRACT

With Indo-Pak relations straining from worse to worst, the 1988 novel, The Shadow Lines, of Amitav Ghosh gets more relevance as its major focus is on the partition inflicted psyches. A nation draws boundary to separate its people from other nations. But, in the case of India and Pakistan the borders are not strong enough to separate people who are the progenies of the same culture and history. How can one divide a nation which has a common past, culture, history and heritage? In fact the makers of the sensational news about the violence on the borders consciously forget the truth that one cannot divide the memories of the people and in turn tries to foster in them hatred for the people across the border. The novel helps us think of a free world without any past or history where people can live together with the freedom of utter strangers.

Key Words: Nation, Nationalism, Partition, Borders and Boundaries.

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A nation is a stable community of people having certain common features. It may be formed on the basis of a common language, culture, ethnicity, or history. Nationalism, though emerged towards the end of the 18th century, is a fairly recent development. Nationalism simply means patriotism or the idea of supporting one's country and the brain behind the concept was considered as that of the Europeans. Till the second half of the 20th century nationalism became a strong weapon in the hands of patriots to fight against the colonial powers and their policies. But now the term is associated with destructive forces and has become a threat to the modern world.

Geography is an important factor in history; but in the building up of a nation geographical boundary is an essential factor. Boundary of a nation is inscribed on the map and a nation's intention to extent its border often leads to violence. But anyway, a nation is a spiritual union and human beings are at its centre. If any external or internal force tries to break the unity, the balance will be lost and the people have to suffer. This is what happens in the case of every invasion or insurgency. When India fell into the hands of Britain, the concept of nation was redefined in terms of the colonizer. Though there were a lot of diversities in the country it had a peculiar unity of its own and the diversities were celebrated. When the colonizer came and established their 'divide and rule policy' it led to the destruction of the whole nation; the destruction of a spiritual union.

Partition of the subcontinent into India, Pakistan and Bangladesh was one of the most traumatic historical events witnessed by the last century and it created a total havoc in the whole subcontinent. The British snatched the country off before giving it the so called 'freedom' and left it into the hands of certain jingoistic hooligans; but the violence that preceded the Partition continues still; the wound has not yet healed. The pangs of partition have become the recurring theme of many Indian English writings. Marked by the inseparable features of death and displacement partition and the writings on partition ever question the concept of nation and the feeling of nationalism.

In his 1988 novel *The Shadow Lines* Amitav Ghosh brings into light the meaninglessness behind drawing lines across a nation in order to divide it into two. Being a Bengali, Ghosh brings into focal point the partition on the Bengal border. Though the novel concentrates much on a single family it rides through the heart of the wounded India, Pakistan and Bangladesh and covers a large span of India's freedom struggle. The narrator of Ghosh's novel is a young boy born and brought up in Kolkata in the post partition India. If the purpose of partition was to give freedom to the people, that freedom was a nightmare for the Bengalese. While reading the newspaper, Amitav Ghosh's narrator is forced to ask: "Why don't they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every place a new name? What would it change? It's a mirage; the whole thing is a mirage. How can anyone divide a memory?"(TSL 247)

In fact freedom was just a mirage for the people on the borders. The line was drawn through their heart; many of them lost their home land; they were cut off from the root. Life in a translated world, away from their homeland was something horrible for many. The grandmother of Ghosh's narrator is such a person who lost herself in between the line, being born on one side and living on the other side of the border.

The novel *The Shadow Lines* brings into focal line Thamma's vision of nationalism. When she was a small girl, her home land was under colonial rule. India's struggle for independence intensified her feeling of nationalism. She was really fascinated by the stories she had heard about the terrorists. She tells her grandson that she would not have flinched even from killing the English magistrate in the name of freedom: "yes, I would have killed him, it was for our freedom, I would have done anything to be free" (39).

She dared to sacrifice her own life for the sake of freedom of her nation. Sacrifice for the country is for Thamma a passion that unites all; and through this what she aimed was to make the nation a better one. When the narration proceeds, the confusions and conflicts in the mind of Thamma is revealed. The partition of Bengal had separated her from her homeland, Dhaka, and later when she wants to 'come' home again she has to fill in a lot of forms at the airport. Thamma gets puzzled while filling the forms, "she would have to fill in Dhaka as her place of birth on that form and that the prospect of this had worried her ... at that moment she had not been able to quite understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her own nationality" (152). Here the reader gets confused of the nationality of Thamma; whether she is an Indian or a Bangladeshi. All the definitions of nation and nationalism fail to give an identity to Thamma. According to Renan,

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things... constitute this soul, this spiritual principle. One is the past, the other is the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present consent, the desire to live together, the desire to continue to invest in the heritage that we have jointly received...The nation, like the individual, is the outcome of a long past of efforts, sacrifices, and devotion...A heroic past with great men and glory is the social capital upon which the national idea rests. (10)

Thamma's vision of nation was something different. For her, the freedom that she imagined or dreamt of was utterly different from the one that she experienced. She had only contempt for "freedom that could be bought for the price of an air ticket. For she too had once wanted to be free. She had dreamt of killing for freedom" (151). The symbolic partition of Thamma's ancestral home is a replica of the impending partition. It brings out the futility of dividing a house with the wooden partition wall and the subsequent isolation that its members faced;

They had all longed for the house to be divided when the quarrels were at their worst, but once it had actually happened and each family had moved into their own part of it, instead of the peace they had so much looked forward to, they found that a strange eerie silence had descended on the house. It was never the same after that; the life went out of it. (123)

Thus the novel, though deals with the lives of the narrator and his grandmother, it also becomes a recorded history of India as the writer could tactfully interweave the tempestuous condition of the country. The title of the novel refers to the borders that provide one with an identity but the same borders become nostalgia for the others who were alienated from their homeland. Even though a graduate and a well experienced school teacher, the long nosed silver haired Thamma was always haunted by the thoughts about her nationality. That is why she keeps on worrying, while talking about Jetha Moshai, "imagine what it must be like to die in another country abandoned and alone in your old age" (135).

Destiny played a role in between, for Thamma Dhaka has become a foreign place as Kolkata is for Jetha Moshai. When Thamma went to Dhaka to 'rescue' him from the riots and the communal violence which made life precarious in the country, he obstinately refuses. He proves himself to be a man of worldly knowledge and in fact becomes a mouthpiece of Ghosh. One can find the very gist of the 251 pages in his single speech. He says:

I know everything. Once you start moving you never stop. That's what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: I don't believe in this India-Shindia. It's all very well, you are going away now, 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. As for me, I was born here, and I will die here. (215)

Though old and bedridden, Jetha Moshai has a better understanding of the world and of the reality that the political upheavals and the communal conflicts in India made its geographical boundaries more flimsy and fragile. Thus, in a way, Amitav Ghosh tells the story of 'the castaways' of partition; the one who is forced to stay away from her home land and the other who could not find out a space in his own home. Nation has become a passion for the jingoistic Thamma, but it is, for the despondent Jetha Moshai, a mere illusion.

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