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The treatment of nation and nationalism: A study of Amitav Ghosh's novel the shadow lines

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to describe nation and nationalism by studying Amitav Ghosh's novel 'The Shadow Lines'. Our world is a place where old binaries are crumbling only to yield newer and formidable ones. The proliferation of theories like Postcolonialism, Multiculturalism, Globalization, Post modernism have upheld or defied national identities and boundaries. We can easily sense a crisis in nationalistic pinning down with destabilizing forces of Globalization diasporas, hybridity and multiculturalism invading the certitudes of nation and nationalism. We are living in the tempestuous uncertainties where the world is becoming increasingly footloose. The terms Nation and Nationalism despite their common usage, have always been enigmatic terms. The study of literature and the theories of nation and nationalism intersect quite legitimately on theoretical crossroads as the myriad affinities binding the two are obviously old and revealingly new. Nationalism is the love of one's country and the desire to be free from other countries. The term nationalism can refer to an ideology, a sentiment, a form of culture, or a social movement that focuses on the nation. Oxford Dictionary defines nationalism as "Devotion to one's own nation; patriotic feelings, principles or efforts". A.K Kaul in "A reading of the Shadow Lines" observes that "in viewing nationalism as both an invention and forces of destruction".

Keywords: treatment of nation, nationalism, a study, Amitav Ghosh's novel

Introduction

Precisely where and when it emerged is difficult to determine, we can take the example of the feeling of nationalism in the Ashvameg Jug by Ram in famous Indian epic Ramayan but its development is closely related to that of the modern state and the push for popular sovereignty that came to a head with the French Revolution in the late eighteenth century. Since that time, nationalism has become one of the most significant political and social forces in history, perhaps most notably as a cause of both the First and Second World Wars.

Benedict Anderson defines nation in his book Imagined Communities "In an anthropological spirit, then, I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community-and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign." "It is imagined because the 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.

The resurgence of patriotism (nationalism?) in the post-Babri India and the post-9/11 US has raised fresh interrogations into the relevance of nationalism. Nationalism is not be confused with patriotism. "Patriotism" means devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life, which one believes to be the best in the world but has no wish to focus on other people. Patriotism is of its native defensive, both militarily and culturally. Nationalism, on the other hand, is inseparable from the desire for power. The abiding purpose of every nationalist is to secure more power and more prestige.

Rabindranath Tagore wrote the following lines;

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;

Where knowledge is free;

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;

Tagore noticed the dangerous seeds of division, intolerance, irrationality and fear contained within the 'national' form of asking for independence from colonialism. Moreover, a nation ends up defining itself in opposition to other nations, particularly to its neighbours.

Amitav Ghosh had revealed the reasons for writing The Shadow Lines in a leading American magazine New Yorker that ghastly events that followed the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi (1984) had deeply pained him.

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He was unable to understand how a community that was essentially Indian-the Sikhs could be made the victims of such an inhuman massacre by their own non Sikh countrymen. Here Ghosh mixes a gritty realism with a surrealist flair to map the brutal consequences of cultural and political structures that restrict identity.

The *Shadow Lines* depicts the various reactions of the different characters regarding the concept of nation and nationalism. The unnamed narrator in the novel comes in contact with different characters in the novel. The narrator was born in an upwardly mobile middle class professional family in Calcutta. He had great impact of her grandmother who is militantly nationalistic woman.

The grandmother belongs to Dhaka of the 20's and is ethically much closer to Dhaka than to a political unit called India, formed in 1947. She migrated to Calcutta in 1936 and had to divide her attachment between a new nation and an old state. Her nationalist fervor gets articulated when she gives away her cherished necklace, the first gift that she had received from her husband after marriage, for the war fund in 1965. She justifies her action to her grandson, 'I gave it away...I gave it to the fund for the war. I had to, don't you see? For your sake; for your freedom. We have to kill them before they kill us; we have to wipe them out'.

The grandmother's faulty sense of nationalism is finally brought out when she revisits old house Dhaka, now the capital of East Pakistan, to bring back her uncle. She discovers that there are no lines between India and East Pakistan in the maps of her mind. But if there aren't any trenches or anything how r people to know? I mean, where is the difference then? and if there is no difference both sides will be the same; it will 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 then...partition and all the killing everything ...if there isn't something in between?

Tridib hopes for a world "where there is no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror" Meenakshi Malohtra observes Tridib is a "product of an era prior to the historical development of nation states, the untold story in the *Shadow line* symbolizes a sense of lost wholeness, an ideal frozen in time. It demonstrates Tridib's desire for a space free of history and painful collective memory." Robi is another important character who suffers the consequences of the nation. His elder brother, Tridib had got killed in a riot in Dhaka, and he happened to be a mute spectator to this disaster.

Almost all the characters reject the artificial division of land and people by politicians. Mostly, nationalism is used as a weapon by the politicians to exploit the simple people of that particular area. They were against the violence in the name of culture and national identities. These artificially created boundaries are mere shadow lines. The *Shadow Lines*, attempts to create a single unified global picture. Ghosh renames these boundaries as 'the shadow lines' lines do not, or can-not demarcate or divide clearly.

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