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## **QUEST FOR UNIFIED IDENTITY IN AMITABH GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Amitabh Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* posits the idea of nationalism which was a matter of full-fledged discussion during the post-partition of India. This article undertakes and examines the characterization of the violent events in *The Shadow Lines*, concentrating on the traumatic life of the characters and the violence to analyze and evaluate the fundamental causes. Ghosh's implication in the novel is that the superficial concept of national identity is a root cause of pervasive violence. The researcher claims that Ghosh backgrounds the identities created by the arbitrarily drawn demarcations of national boundaries and desires for a unified identity, a new and distinctive whole created from the fusion of different cultures, ethnicities, and nationalities as a solution to prevent the recurrence of insane frenzies and communal violence in the era of modern diversity, interconnectedness and globalization.

**Keywords:** partition, trauma, identity, nationality, displacement

### **INTRODUCTION**

*The Shadow Lines* views national identity as a perennial source of terrifying violence by externalizing violent events and the traumatic life of the characters, he shows that the identities created by the conventionally drawn demarcations of national boundaries are mere shadows. In the novel *Thamma* shows her instability even in Dhaka, a place that is already separated from Pakistan, she projects another partition because of riots there in Bangladesh. She admits that 'she understood very well, the old man asserts by muttering his teeth.

I understand very well, the old man muttered. I know everything, I understand 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're 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'll die here. (157)

Moreover, by presenting his characters' yearning for the reconciliation of different beliefs, cultures, and nationalities, he suggests a unified identity, as an alternative to prevent the recurrence of insane frenzies and communal violence in the era of diversity and globalization.

The grandmother, in the novel, is presented as a rigid nationalist whose attempt to bring the poor old man from Dhaka to India is born out of not any family bond, but it was an conceptual unit of nationalism that encourages her to bring him to India. But her very thirst for nationalism invited the tragedy causing the death of Tridib, her uncle, and Khalil. During the war between India and Pakistan, she donates the only gold chain, her husband's gift, to the war fund. Unable to understand the fundamental causes of Tridib's death, she develops a sense of hostility towards the Muslims. Tridib was a scholar of wide interests and a lover of all living beings who does not like to see even a dying dog in torment. So it is ironic that Tridib was killed by a religious nationalist and that occurred after the Hazratball incident. Ghosh here shows that the heart of the violence lies in the politics of ethnic and national identity in its most negative form undermining trust and understanding and reigning supremacy to fear and insecurity.

The writer highlights the drawing lines and ridiculous irrationality of partition carved out by the people to establish their identity. Ila's making for the narrator a dusty cheque board of lines indicating different portions of a house, rubbing them off and redrawing borders on a map. The artificial divisions of the identity of mankind by political borders are also demonstrated by Tridib's atlas upon which the narrator makes circles with different centers arriving at amazing results pointing to the geographical closeness of the people living elsewhere. Robi's knowledge that people kill each other, drawing thousands of lines, for what they think freedom and protection that the national identity provides, asserts the same absurdity of drawing the frontiers among human beings.

To liberate his characters from the narrow, bullying hegemony of an artificially constructed national and ethnic identity, Ghosh demonstrates the mingling of the

characters across the national and cultural frontiers. The interconnectedness of the characters in the novel underlines the need for a friendly ambiance for existence and civilized bonds among people living in different cultures. The interpersonal relationship between different characters functions as mirror images of each other. The relationship between Tresawen and Mayadebi, Tridib, May, Jethamoshai, and Khalil transcends the existing craze of war, hatred, and hostility. Besides, the narrator's imagination visualizes cross-cultural interactions, his origin, and nationalism.

### **NATIONALISM AND GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES***

This story gives us a subtle view of rigorous nationalism which brings a sense of disintegration among the people, however, which is merely a source of terrifying violence creating an atmosphere of hatred and animosity among the people. Instead, Ghosh in this novel abides in people from different castes, creeds, and customs to prevent the holocaust of the modern world with his view of cosmopolitanism. Ghosh presents the global characters on the one hand, and the world map on the other to fuse local and global for communal harmony. The friendship of the four—Alan, Dan, Mike, and Francesca from different places of the world; Tridib has a desire to live at present and meet May in the place where they were cut off from the past and history. Ila has a desire to escape from her root and culture while living in London. She wanted to be free from the domination of her culture and nationality. She is imposed and perpetuated suggest taking apart the world order based on nation states and erase the shadow lines between the people and between the countries they dwell in. The erasing of the shadow lines constitutes Ghosh's belief in globalization in its positive aspects.

By undertaking an examination of nation, nationalism, and globalization, this novel seeks to shed light on the role globalization can play in the context of diversity and the interconnectedness of the present world. The post-cold-war era is marked, on the one hand, as the age of national identity, on the other, as the age of globalization. *In Imagined Communities: Reflections On The Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1992), Benedict Anderson defines nationalism thus: "Nationalism as a particular form of ideological system which, like kinship and religion, often represents itself to itself as a natural, spontaneously generated and fully developed world view uninfluenced by the history, economics and politics" (143).

Here, Anderson is hinting at the perils and pitfalls of nationalism strictly defined based on the national border that gives premium emphasis on history, economics, and politics. Partition violence and its material effects are caused by the sublime artificiality of nationalism defined by the state based on the geographical boundary.

In the sense of truth, a person does not like to be born in a particular country which makes nationality appear as inescapable as race and. The genuineness of this attachment creates a false impression of neutrality which reflects the nation as a unit untouched by ideology. A nation is simply “there”. Geographic borders that are joint by ties of blood, language, and culture all of which are supposed to be the impulsive expressions of some national spirit limit it. Renan, like many thinkers, observes the nation as an unnatural entity. Since it is a social construct, the nature of the nation is always unstable. Renan’s nationalism sustains itself by a desire to complete the values of common legacy and by determined for the creation of beautiful nation. As he submerges:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Only two things actually constitute this or this spiritual Principle. One lies in the past, one is the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together [...]. The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavors, sacrifice, and devotion of all cults, that of ancestors is the most legitimate, for the ancestors have made us what we are; a heroic past, great men, glory [...] this is the social capital upon which one bases a national idea. (19)

Renon, here, basically highlights the common legacy of memories different from the rigorous and rotten definition of the state based on the declination of the national boundary. National identity on the ground of rigorous taking a particular religion is always detrimental to the harmony of society.

This research is primarily concerned with the issue of how the sense of nationalism was caused in the Indian mind by the partition of Bangladesh and caused a damaging effect on the lives of people at their family level. The shattering of the family of Tha'mma is the result of the partition violence and this shattering of a family is at a macrocosmic level the tearing of the national fabric. The novel tells the story of the three generations of the narrator’s family spread over Dhaka, Calcutta, and London. The whole narrative has been written against the backdrop of the civil strife in post-partition East Bengal and riot-hit Calcutta. On the one hand, there is the narrator’s family consisting of his grandmother,

Mayadebi's elder sister, and his parents; on the other are Mayadebi, her husband, and their three sons, Jatin, Tridib, and Robi and a daughter Ila.

The narrator's grandmother, Tha'mma, is the central character of the novel. *The Shadow Lines* is very much her story. Dhaka is her native city and now she has been living in Calcutta. Her uncle, Jethamoshai, has been living alone in Dhaka. It is difficult for her to go and bring her uncle back to where she has been living due to the riots in big cities like Calcutta. Whether in her present condition or her early life, it is the strife and riots that have shattered her life. The narrator explains that his grandmother was born into a big joint family. In the narrator's words, her house was "...very crowded. There was a big joint family then, with everyone living and eating together her grandparents, her parents, she and Mayadebi, her Jethamoshai—her father's elder brother—and his family, which included three cousins of roughly her age, as well as a couple of spinster aunts." (121). Such a big family had been torn apart. Her uncle Jethamoshai is alone in Dhaka. But Tha'mma and the other members of her family have been living in Calcutta now.

Now for the grandmother, the house in Dhaka is not important. What is important is her uncle because due to the increasing strife and riots Jethamoshai is not safe living alone there. When she goes to bring him, she says, "We don't want the house. We've come to take you home with us. It's not safe for you here. There might be trouble any day now. You must move while you can." (156). This implies that one of the disturbing features of life in Calcutta/Dhaka and such cities is the increasing tension between the Hindu and Muslim communities and the eruption of violence which takes its toll on innocent lives and destruction of public as well as private property. The narrator's grandmother's family has been the live victim of this partition violence. When Tha'mma goes to Dhaka on a visit, she is the ignorant observer to the most horrendous act in her life when a rioting crowd kills her aged uncle and her young nephew. She is left confused as she cannot understand the meaning of what happens.

It was not only Tha'mma's house being shattered by the partition violence. One of the narrator's neighbors also narrates the same story of being tortured by violence in the post-partition period. The neighbor's father-in-law was still in Dhaka whereas the other members are in India. In Dhaka, the old man's condition was so pitiable that they could not bear it. The neighbor narrates, "That's what I said. The house was empty after Partition, everyone had left but my father-in-law, and he didn't even try to keep the refugees out... He was—you know—not all there; he didn't really care what happened."

(99). In such a condition the grandmother responds by saying, “Imagine what it must be like to die in another country, abandoned and alone in your old age.” (99). Such is the condition of the members of the same family. Because of such a pitiable condition that when Tha'mma is told that she will go to see her uncle Jethamoshai, she becomes so happy as the narrator says, “That night, for the first time in months my grandmother seemed really excited. When I went up to see her, before going to bed, I found her pacing around the room, her face flushed, her eyes shining. I was delighted.” (110). This is just because of the love of her uncle. It is not their intention to live isolating the old man from them but the effect of the violence caused by partition.

The criticism of violence can also be seen in the old man's speech. It is meaningless to move from one place to the other in the name of the partition. Ultimately it leads us nowhere. We will reach other countries where there will be also the possibility of partition. So, the old man says:

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're 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. (157)

This condemnation of the partition and violence refers that their effects can be seen in the heart of the common people. Their lives also have been shattered by that kind of act of drawing shadow lines between two countries.

Identity is a recent subject in the modern-day study of culture. The issue of identity is studied with ethnicity, class, gender, race, sexuality, and subcultures. The issue of identity becomes prominent when someone is under threat. Therefore, an individual goes on searching the identity of one's own into the culture where he/she is living. It is a culture that provides the identity to an individual but when someone is cut off from the culture of one's own, he loses the identity and it gets into a crisis. During this course, identity goes on changing. It no longer remains the same and stable. The identities are formed under circumstances of different cultural domains which are formed. Since there are no universal cultural domains, the formation of the identities is also documented and made by representation.

Since history is Ghosh's prime obsession, his novel, *The Shadow Lines* is imbued with both political and historical consciousness. Written against the backdrop of the civil

strife in post-partition East Bengal and riot-hit Calcutta, the novel exposes that the narrowed, politicized concept of identity which is based on religion and ethnic nationality was the main cause of the partition violence. Nationalism is mostly defined in terms of religion in India. In the discussion *Thamma* ends up questioning some of the fundamentals of her idea of nationalism:

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 the sides will be the same; it'll be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it for all then - partition and the killing and everything if there isn't something in between? (151)

By reinforcing the similarities between Dhaka and Calcutta even after the partition, the novel questions the ideology of national identity. One of the fundamental characteristics of the ideology of nationalism is that it defines itself in opposition to other countries across borders. But the two cities, Dhaka and Calcutta, are seen as “as inverted image of each other” (223). The writer believes the “unified identity”, a new and distinctive ‘whole’ produced from the fusion of different distinct cultural, ethnic, or national identities, is necessary to prevent the recurrence of insane frenzies and communal violence in this age of modern diversity and interconnectedness. Partha Chatterjee in *Nationalism as a Problem* states:

Nationalism has once more appeared on the agenda of world affairs. Almost every day, state leaders and political analysis in western countries declare that with ‘the collapse of communism’ [...] the print nationalism in different parts of the world. Since in this day and age a phenomenon has first to be recognized as a ‘problem’ before it can claim the attention of the people whose business it is to decide what should concern the public, nationalism seems to have regained sufficient notoriety for it to be liberated from the arcane practices of area specialists and made once more a subject of general debate. (214)

By presenting the characters with interdependency, and a great desire for the reconciliation of different beliefs and cultures, the novel questions the essentialist identity. The characters in the novel cross national and cultural boundaries. It can be said that though there are partitions at the geographical level, these demarcations have damaging effects on the day-to-day life of the common people. This is vivid in the life of the grandmother in the novel. Her house has been shattered by the violence caused by the very partition. This shattering of the family life of the common people is symbolic of the

tearing of the national fabric. On the microcosmic level, the feelings of the people being anguished and the reason for them being trapped is the symbol of the breaking down of the nation. Therefore, the shadow lines of partition are the cause of disturbance at both individual and national levels and they can be reflected in both the national and local levels.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, Ghosh in his novel unpacks emphasizing the unified identity on the global level that immensely help cross ethnic and national boundaries creating a sense of brotherhood and a friendly environment within and outside the nations. It makes the people forget they are born of this and that ethnicity, religion, or nation, rather than promoting the concept of “universal brotherhood.”

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