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INTERROGATING THE POSTCOLONIAL NATION IN THE GLOBAL AGE: A CONTEXTUAL READING OF AMITAV GHOSH'S THE SHADOW LINES

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Short Profile

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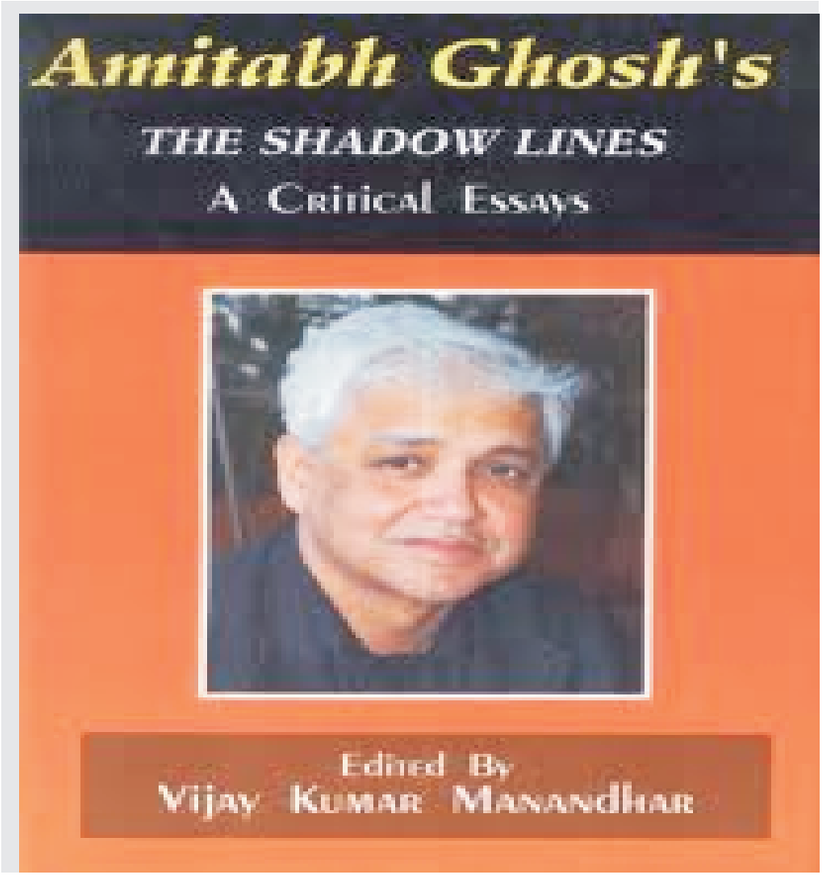

ABSTRACT:

The celebration of nationnessless by theorists and advocates of globalization jettisons the foundational roles of nation, nationalism, ethnicism, identity and by assumption reduces the efficacy of the project of Postcolonialism. As the sovereignty of the subjective state is the raison d'être of Postcolonialism, the agency of the nation cannot be undermined by the rhetoric of 'shadow lines', 'global world', 'shrinking globe', 'spatio-temporal conflation' and the like. The project of nationalism cannot be obfuscated under the rubric of globalization as evidently one of the principal dangers confronting the modern state is the resurgence of nationalism in different parts of the world (Chatterjee 1993:3); we cannot remain mute to the discordant cries of nationalism emanating from the countries of the Middle East, South East and Africa. The immediate catalysts for such separatist cries have been the concentration of wealth in the hands of autocrats in power for decades besides a host of other complementary issues.

KEYWORDS

Postcolonial Nation , Global Age , shrinking globe .

INTRODUCTION

Thus a Postcolonial study is not merely a discourse of decolonization but underscores the underbelly of globalization and the dynamics of the modern nation-state. The abysmally dismal pictures of Asia and Africa script a different discourse of progress. The material frills of globalization accessible only to the crème de la crème have not percolated to the rank and file who still remain mired in abject poverty and grossly inhuman conditions attesting to the "detritus" of the whole process of decolonization, to use a term from Gayatri Spivak C. Postcolonial intellectual analyses underpin what is really new about globalization. Neither the local nor the global can be treated as exclusivist; the local has certainly been caught in the pace of acceleration, with concomitant infusion of a new consciousness or awareness, demonstrated in the clamour of ethnic movements for a homeland or autonomy, whether it is the ethnic nationalisms concretized in Eastern Europe or the demands in the Middle East for a Palestine or Kurdish state or right in our own yards the vociferous cries for autonomy raised by different ethnic groups. These cries interrogate and deconstruct the patina of utopianism promoted by globalization.

Certainly the provenance of the nation can be traced to the Enlightenment and the Revolution which in the opinion of Benedict Anderson destroyed the legitimacy of "divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm". Accordingly, the nation is a "community' of a "deep, horizontal comradeship"; it is "sovereign" but also "limited" because even the largest of them is bound by territorial fixity beyond which lie other nations:

"No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind. The most messianic nationalists do not dream of a day when all the members of the human race will join their nation in the way, that it was possible, in certain epochs, for, say, Christians to dream of a wholly Christian planet". (Anderson 2006:7)

The myth of the nation was a very potent and productive ideological tool that fed the engine of colonial resistance in the twentieth century. However the contemporary spatial realities have provoked questions about the efficacy of the myth of the nation. Leading theorists and intellectuals have rejected the notion of the nation as redundant. In fact some of the most compelling critiques of the nationalist ideology have emerged from the postcolonial quarters. (Gandhi 2008:108) Said's *Culture and Imperialism* is a telling critique of nationalism where he declares the project of nationalism as both a necessary and now entirely obsolete evil. Said's contention is based on the premise that postcolonial nations' regression into combative and dissonant forms of nativism obscures the project of a democratic utopia of free and fair internationalism. (Said 1994) Amitav Ghosh's critique of the lines of demarcation obviously celebrates the patina of internationalism raised by Said. Perhaps the dialectical engagements of nationalism with communalism have undermined the agenda of nationalism in the sub-continent. Such a sentiment finds resonance in one of Salman Rushdie's essays where he alludes to a Bengali intellectual Robi Chaterjee's views on nationalism:

"According to Robi, the idea of nationalism in India had grown more and more chauvinistic, had become narrower and narrower.....in a country created by the Congress' nationalist campaign the well-being of the people might now require that all nationalist rhetoric be abandoned". (Rushdie 1997:32)

In Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines (SLs) the theft of the holy relic from the Hazratbal Shrine in Kashmir ignites communal flare ups on both sides of the frontiers interrogates as well as deconstructs the essence of borders interrogate the project of nationalism and the inscription of the communal element in the nationalist discourse. Ghosh questions the project of nationalism in the violent deaths of Tridib, the Old Man and Khalil. (Ghosh 1995)

The concept of a unitary homogenous geographical space contradicts the continuing, often covert, neo-colonialisms of economic, political and cultural dominance. The move from colonial to

autonomous, postcolonial status involved only a minor shift from direct to indirect rule, to a position of being not so much of independence as of being in-dependence. (Young 2003:3) Thus as long as postcolonial societies are plagued by the disparities, the agenda of nationalism will be an efficacious instrument for addressing the same. Fanon foregrounded nationalism for its capacity to heal the historical wounds inflicted by the 'Manichean' structure of colonial culture which confines the colonized to a luminal, barely human existence. Theorists of Postcolonialism have postulated that with the appropriation of the nation-state, which was one of the foundational tropes of nationalism, the discourse of nation making reached its generic closure, conferring a distinctive generic identity. The formation of the nation state hinged on the appropriation of power that was divested of the state by the colonizers. In this transfer, the nationalist revolutionaries or elites came to inhabit the bureaucratic structures that were in the first place used for the purpose of enforcing colonial rule. Partha Chatterjee comments in this context that nationalism "produced a discourse in which, even as it challenged the colonial claim to political domination, it also accepted the very intellectual premises of "modernity" on which colonial domination was used". (Chatterjee 1986:30) A somewhat analogous perspective finds resonance in one of the interviews given by Gayatri Spivak C. where she alluded to the success of the repressive structure of government imposed by the colonial rulers that could be chiefly attributed to the opportunist indigenous elite who identified with such a structure so that they could entrench their own positions. The result was what she referred to as "epistemic violence and the production of the colonial subject". (Spivak Chakravorty 1987:77) But inspite of being derivative of a European etymology, nationalism not only contradicts the pre-eminence of the state but also generates dissent through the autonomous political imagination of the people-who-comprise-the-nation. Such a view also finds articulation by Sanjib Baruah who maintains that the imagined communities that co-exist and are occasionally caught in tension with the nation-state are best located in the intellectual universe of nations and nationalism. The 'politics of identity' of these imagined communities, unlike ethnic politics in Chicago, say, all revolve around real or imagined homelands. (Baruah 2003:5) Thus the idea of the monolithic infallible idea of the state is open to acrimonious dissent of different struggling imaginings. The potency of nationalism cannot be discounted so easily. All diasporic communities volunteer to 'belong' to 'associations' by default of belonging to a common nation and nationality and the communitarian belongingness is demonstrably visible when they get together to celebrate national festivals and commemoration days.

Partha Chatterjee had interrogated the dialectical relationship between anti-colonial nationalism and alleged elitism; the implication is the emergence of an indigenous form of neo-colonialism comprising of western educated elites who perpetuated the machinery of colonialism and deliberately kept the people disempowered. Ironically the national machinery that came into force overrode the voices and activities of the masses or the local forms of 'subaltern consciousnesses'. Evidently, the centre/periphery binary informs the historiography of India, shoving to the margins the countless small narratives of Partition, the concomitant displacement and alienation, the crossover of subjectivities engineered by communalism. Gyanendra Pandey makes the exposition that "as in history writing, so in films and fiction, Indian intellectuals have tended to celebrate the story of the Independence struggle rather than dwell on the agonies of Partition". (Pandey 2010:7) In the context of such an argument we can infer that the SLs document the small narratives of Partition that have been squeezed into the shadows of the metanarratives. Each story is accentuated by a duality; that inspite of belonging to the nationalist discourse is also an interrogation of the circumstances that created the stories.

Amitav Ghosh's The SLs celebrates global time and space by questioning the epistemology of borders. Ghosh deliberately chooses transcontinental locales to allow a span of three globetrotting

generations to traverse time and space extensively. The SLs foregrounds the shadowy essence of borders as the world shrinks to a prism of multiple cultures and people. We may assume that by dispelling the notion of borders Ghosh toys with the idea of a unitary homogenous space. Hence we find that with the exception of Thamma and her generation, all the major characters born in the Post-Partition period, are unfazed by the rhetoric of nationalism as the spatial mobility is not precluded by territorial fixity. They 'belong' to the 'world' at large inspite of keeping residence at definite geographical locales hemmed in by frontiers. Tridib is 'a man without a country', a man blessed with a resourceful imagination whose cross-cultural identifications enable him to indulge in flights beyond the limits of frontiers. Although he has travelled extensively he chooses to live in Calcutta to pursue his doctoral degree in Archaeology. In Thamma's perspective he is the dilettante and gallivanting element whose attitude of non-conformity 'stinks' and one who has no substantial contribution to the process of nation-building. But the child narrator's perception diverges radically from the grandmother's tangent. Tridib was a larger than life personality for the narrator who had made him a virtual traveler in worlds he had not seen and been to. The cartographic lines on Bartholomew's Atlas that Tridib spread out before the young narrator are like 'magical talismans'. They dissolve into shadow lines that place Chiang Mai in Thailand in spatial proximity with Calcutta than New Delhi, Chengdu in China nearer than Srinagar is. When Tridib and Illa regale the narrator with their experiences the young boy invokes the places with an uncanny graphic accuracy and felt immediacy:

"I puzzled over what Tridib had said, and in a while I began to imagine the sloping roofs of Colombo for myself: the pattern they made if one wheeled in the sky above them, how sharply they rose if one looked at them from below, the mossiness of their tiles when one saw them close up, from a first floor window……." (Ghosh 1991:45)

Thus the narrator and his uncle Tridib are at once rooted to an originary place but 'belong' to multiple places, the imaginative universe surpassing the rationale of borders. Ghosh's fetishization of all lines as shadow lines is contestable. Although the tropes of core/periphery binary have been routed to the trashcan as redundant notions in the age of global velocity of capital, technologies and peoples, the older dialectical disparities are still in force. The indices of rich and poor, development and underdevelopment still stigmatize large parts of the globe. Until the binaries are reduced /mitigated/ effaced, Postcolonialism as a discourse and project would hover around to capture the discordant voices. Ali Behdad raises an important issue in his essay, *On Globalization, Again* that inspite of all the brouhaha about globalization the basic problematic of colonizer/colonized continues to bedevil the shrinking world inflected by technological innovations. (Behdad 2006:28) It is simply a new phase of imperialism that has been restructured and replicated in the contemporary world. We cannot ignore the emergence of the US as a monolithic superpower sometimes bulldozing small nations in South Asia/Latin America or ascribing to itself the power to adjudicate in matters pertaining to the Middle East. Thus I would like to argue that although borders dissolve into shadow lines and nations, nationalities and cultures converge and coalesce, the patina of assimilation and acculturation is debatable.

While Tridib and the narrator were rooted to an originary place inspite of belonging to multiple sites, Illa stood at a diametrically opposite end, a Postcolonial cosmopolitan migrant, who is largely unperturbed by the essence of nation and nationhood. She rejects her originary roots and birth-place to set up 'home' in London as the cosmopolitanism of the place ensured her the freedom from all encumbrances, restraints. For Illa, the idea of home, nation and nationality elided political ramifications as her postcolonial diasporic subjectivity automatically granted her membership of an "imagined community" whose borders constitute a series of "transit lounges of airports". Illa, is in fact, the rootless migrant whose myopic vision is clouded by deceptions of nation and nationhood. The grounded certainties of roots are replaced with the transnational contingencies of routes. Illa qualifies Paul Gilroy

and Stuart Hall's conception of the constructedness of all identity. She is the Bhabian hybrid-a subjectivity that is beyond exclusionary, fixed binary notions of identity based on ideas of rootedness and cultural, racial and national purity. Bhaba's theorizing recapitulates his argument that the globalised world demands new ways of thinking about identity, community and knowledge. But such an essentialist perspective is perilous to the project of Postcolonialism as it overlooks cultural and historical specifics. Critical theories of diaspora identities which celebrate hybridity and difference can be "completely at odds with the actual experience of difference as undergone by diaspora peoples in their countries of residence. (R. Radhakrishnan 2001:174) Paradoxically, the same Illa who was born a "free woman and free spirit" affecting an alien culture meekly gives in to the secret of her life in one of the most vulnerable moments of her life: "I'm about as chaste, in my own way, as any woman you'll ever meet (ibid:188).Thus, the tropes of hybridity and 'cultural diversity' are convenient fictions to mask the disparities experienced by migrants.

The SLs consistently alludes to the referential 'mirror images' or 'looking-glass borders', an attestation of Amitav Ghosh's rejection of the notion of nationalism as redundant. Ghosh drives the shadowy essence of borders into Thamma's imaginings evidently in her quizzing about the absence of trenches and strips of land to demarcate the borders and her concomitant justification of the "partition and all the killing and everything-if there isn't something in between?" (ibid: 151) Though she was born in Dhaka the invented place of her nationality was India. When on one occasion her son, in a lighter vein referred to themselves as refugees, Thamma takes umbrage at that constructedness of identity as they had left Dhaka before the Partition. When she discovers that one of Jethmoshai's sons lives right in Calcutta, perhaps at Garia, she immediately plans to visit them. During the conversation, when she learns that Jethamoshai was still alive, she is visibly shaken, overwhelmed by a flood of emotions. Her sensitivity takes umbrage at the thought of leaving the poor old man at the mercy of the refugees. He must be brought back to where he actually belongs. Thamma's perception of nationality belies the spatio- temporal conflation of a borderless globe. She quizzes her son about the cartographic lines that she had looked up in the atlas. Surely, there must be "trenches perhaps, or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of lands" to demarcate India from East Pakistan (ibid: 151). Her son's explanation that the border starts right at the airport lounge leaves her flabbergasted. Travelling to Dhaka was no longer an easy proposition as it involved a cumbrous process of filling up forms declaring their nationality, date of birth, place of birth which required her to fill in the blanks with 'Dhaka'. She slides into a psychological conundrum as her place of birth is so messily at odds with her nationality. She had always travelled in the past and it did not necessitate travel documents. She could 'come home' whenever she wanted.

In the twilight of her life, she decides to repair and retrieve the filial chord that she had to severe a long time ago. The notion of a 'home' existed in her memory, hence upon arrival in Dhaka, the visuals that greeted her jostled for recognition in the framework of her memory. Salman Rushdie postulates in Imaginary Homelands that migrants can envision their home only in fissures and fragments though the refracted image can never be plenitudinous. Thamma might have crossed the frontiers and been an active participant in the "deep horizontal comradeship" of Pan Indian nationalism but in some recess of her consciousness, fragments of a lost home lingers that pop up across the frontiers. Her desperate retrieval agenda hinges on the reclamation of the vestigial memories of an abandoned home. Thus when she sets feet in Dhaka, Thamma is immediately drawn into a vortex of memory and reality as the old familiar places and people defy her frame of Dhaka that she was accustomed to. Prior to the Partition, Dhanmundi was a vast expanse of wasteland; later it transformed into a swanky upscale enclave for ministers and diplomats. The dilapidated old family house on Jindbahar lane finally reassures her memory and imagination. Yet, inside the house, the dichotomies of roots and belonging,

home and homelessness once again unfold when the Old man, despite his senility, stubbornly refuses to be uprooted as he is well-versed in the arbitrariness of cartographic lines. He adamantly clings on to his 'home' in his defiant statement "As for me I was born here, and I'll die here". When his sons took the trains he had prophesied "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?" (ibid: 215).

The Old man belongs to an 'imagined community' of people who cohere by right of being born at a particular place irrespective of religious affiliations. His place of birth provides him with certitude and a sense of belonging. Moreover he is shrewd enough to realize the fatalism of moving beyond the borders, the truth entrenched in his psyche that once he is uprooted from his place of birth he would be simply a rootless being without belonging to any place and hence the finality of his tone: "As for me I was born here, and I will die here". And indeed the words of the Old man are prophetic, for within less than a decade of their utterance, in 1971, Bangladesh was carved out of East Pakistan.

Thamma's standpoint on borders contradicts the Old man's perspective. As a child reared in the climate of the anti-colonial struggle it was only natural that her outlook was directly tempered by the rhetoric of nationalism. Drawn to the drama of nationalism very early in her life and fed on the legends of Khudiram Ghosh and Bagha Jatin, Thamma's insight into the idea of a nation almost approximates a fanaticism. She was obviously indoctrinated by the abstractions of a fiery nationalism manifest in the disclosure that she had harboured the secret desire of being part of a terrorist group to fight for independence. After all she confesses that it was for the freedom for her country: "I would have done anything to be free". The vehemence of the nationalist struggle certainly drills into her definitive notions of 'freedom', 'nationalism' and 'borders'. Thamma encompasses identity in terms of an 'imagined national community' where the nation is coterminous with a 'horizontal comradeship' (Anderson 2006:7). Even if we acknowledge that the nation is an imaginary "invention" which in the contemporary period has been relegated to reductionism, it is an idea that still has a magnetic appeal. Otherwise why are people still attached to this invention? Certainly the nation evokes unconditional love, and often "self-sacrificing love", a fact attested by the cultural products of love-the various literary genres are manifestations of this undying love. Nowhere do we find expressions of negativity in analogous cultural products. Anderson further justifies that the last two wars are extraordinary not so much for the decimation of lives as for the colossal numbers who were inspired to sacrifice their lives for the cause of the nation. (ibid: 141-144) "Ultimately it is the fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill as willingly to die for such limited imaginings". (ibid: 7) Thus Thamma as part of this 'imagined national community' perforce believes in 'the reality of nations and borders' and those relationships between nations can be sustained either by war or friendship. Paradoxically, in the post- Partition period, the word 'freedom' so fraught with meaning earlier, loses its connotation and is rendered largely ambivalent. Thus in the twilight of her life, Thamma nurtured only a deep-seated contempt for freedom "that could be brought for the price of an air ticket

Thus Ghosh's SLs as the etymology of the title signifies is not simply a story of Partition but a psychological excursion into the terrains of displacement and assimilation, of conflicting subjecthood, citizenry, nation and nationality, of transcultural acculturation. In this age of transnational flow and intercourse of information, people and commodities, the idea of the nation just cannot be wished away. This text of Partition gains resonance by the incorporation of the tropes of 'memory' and 'imagination'. It is primarily through the vehicle of memory that people, places, events and times are invoked to justify the logic of the nation state and possible answers to the presence of the gaps and fissures in the nationalist discourse. And it is on this questing journey that he retrieves from memory the many stories

that are woven into the texture of the text. The stories reflect the socio-political and cultural frame of the mirror images of the sub-continent prior to and after the Partition. In conclusion, the SL is a dialogic rendition of the asymmetries and inequities that are consequent to the biography of a nation.

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