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“Inventing” Nation through Imagination: A Postcolonial Reading of Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*

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The concept of nation has assumed an unconventional sort of implication in the postcolonial world. It no longer merely refers to the strictly political definition of a fixed geographical territory consisting of a community of people who shares some likeness in terms of caste, creed, race, religion or language. Postcolonial critics like Benedict Anderson have called nation just an imaginary construct which compels people to share a sense of unity and brotherhood despite their inequalities and disparateness. Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*, in a way, seeks to portray this very postcolonial notion of a nation. Moreover, it also vividly represents how borders and boundaries are merely political instruments which creates geographical divisions but cannot separate the individuals from their age-long affinity with the erstwhile nation. This paper attempts to examine how nations are “invented” by different individuals through imagination. The cartographical representation of different places by the narrator also bears much significance for the understanding of nation-making in the novel. An attempt has also been made to look into the issues of nation and nationalism in the novel through a brief reading of Salman Rushdie’s *Imaginary Homelands* and Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*.

Published in the year 1988, Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* belongs to that larger group of fictional works which explores the post-independent India from a postcolonial perspective. Postcolonial novels often deals with the various issues characteristic to the postcolonial nations like the issue of identity-crisis, sense of alienation from the homeland, multi-culturalism, hybridity and mimicry. Postcolonialism also looks at the concept of nation and nationalism in a slightly unconventional manner. In a narrow sense of the term, a nation is generally defined as a conglomeration of people who are bound together by the common thread of race, religion or language and occupies a fixed geographical territory. But postcolonial findings contests this rigid definition of a nation. According to the postcolonial perspective, nation does not have a real existence, it merely exists in the minds of its members. It is therefore not very rigid and hence possesses certain amount of instability. In this novel, Amitav Ghosh has examined this instability by looking at the way different characters perceive the concept of a nation.

The idea of concretization of nation has been debunked by the very nature of the narrative itself. A complex yet intriguing sort of narrative has been woven by the unnamed narrator to narrate some seemingly disparate events from 1939 London to 1964 Dhaka and Calcutta and again to 1979 London. The narrative travels between these three places but the nature of the story is such that it cannot be confined to any particular geographical location as the narrator says that it is a story that “happened everywhere, wherever, you wished it.” (Ghosh 186) Thus the grand narrative associated with the history of a nation is not always necessary rather the smaller narratives of the common people holds actual significance.

The story of the novel has been set in a few important junctures in history. The events related to Tridib's, childhood has been set in 1939 London, a period marked by the outbreak of the Second World War. Similarly, the events related to the narrator and Ila's childhood as well as Tridib's youth, May's visit to India and the subsequent untimely death of Tridib in Dhaka has all been set in the period between 1960-64, again a period of political significance because of the various communal riots happening during the time. By presenting the story in the backdrop of these turbulent periods in history, Ghosh has tried to interrogate the larger issue of "what is a nation?" Nation-making is a political phenomenon. The political structure of a nation suddenly decides to divide a country by drawing an arbitrary line just in a similar manner as we see in the novel the Jethamoshai deciding to create a partition in the old house of Dhaka. The division was much sought by the members of the house but the moment it happened it did not give them any real pleasure. "It was never the same again after that, the life went of it." (Ghosh 123) The partition of a nation and the creation of a new nation creates a similar impact. For an individual, a nation not only implies the idea of a homeland, but such other connotations like tradition, culture, identity and memory are also associated with it. In such a case, the whole concept of nation as a political or geographical territory loses ground because geographically a part can be segregated from a nation but it is not possible to separate people's sense of belongingness, the claim of their culture and tradition and the fond memories which they associate with their nation.

The idea of a nation has been created, re-created as well as dismantled in the imagination of most of the characters in the novel. As a child, the narrator had always listened to the innumerable stories that Tridib told him about London, or the Price family as also the various incidents of the war that they experienced during their stay in London. As the narrator himself admits Tridib lent him the eye through which he could discover the world in his consciousness. However it must be noted that he did not merely see these places as Tridib narrated them to him, but rather he "invented" them anew through his imagination. It was once again Tridib who taught the narrator the function of one's imagination. At a particular instance in the novel, Ila narrates before her family a funny episode of a snake showing up in the garden of their house in Colombo. After listening to the story while the entire family was more interested in conjecturing whether the snake was poisonous or not, Tridib noticed another thing- that Ila's house had no sloping roof. He asked the narrator to imagine what it would be like living in a house where there was no flat roof and thus one could fly no kites or play around. Thus, the narrator realized that the view of a place not only offers its seer a mere sight to behold but it can also carry a host of imaginative sights which could be more detailed and more intricate. It is this imaginative capacity that can carry one's mind to places beyond time and places and across boundaries and borders.

For Ila this sort of imagination did not have any significance. She believed in living the life of reality and for her "the current was the real" (Ghosh 30) Past experiences and the imaginary world had very little space in her life. Ila's perspective comes in contrast to the narrator's way of perceiving the world and time and again the narrator is reminded of the "mystery of difference" that distinguished them from each other. For Ila, the world is just a place which exists on its own and it must be taken as it is. According to her, her first-hand experiences of places were real and concrete and thus they were more plausible than those "fairylands" which Tridib had created for the narrator. Ila claimed to have more knowledge about

London or other places that she had visited as also she thought to have a better understanding of the politics of the time or even of wartime London. But the knowledge that the narrator had through other's perception and his own imagination were much more profound than Ila's superficial knowledge. The narrator very rightly admits, "I knew nothing at all about England except as an invention". (Ghosh 105) This "invention" however was more strong and prominent because it was done through imagination and thus it was not a mere perception of the world but a deeper understanding of the experiences which were more detailed and precise.

Tridib's detailed narration of places not only influenced the narrator to trigger off his imaginative faculty, but also pictured in his mind a complete map of those places. The narrator thus in a way visited London through Tridib's eyes in his childhood long before he actually went to London and saw those places after almost 20 years. London was not a new invention for him then. Every lane, every nook and corner was familiar to him because the map that he carried in his mind through all the years did not raise the need to look up any other map for destinations. The detailed descriptions of the streets of London as seen in the following passage is almost like a map in narration and shows the preciseness with which the narrator discovered unseen places through Tridib's narration :

"When we came out of the tube station I stopped them and pointed down the road. Since this is West End Lane , I said , that must be Sumatra Road over there. So that corner must be where the air raid shelter was , the same one that Robi's mother and your uncle Alan ducked into on their way back from Mill Lane, when one of those huge high-calibre bombs exploded on Solent Road, around the corner, blowing up most of the houses there. And that house, that one, just down the road, over there, on the corner of Lymington Mansions, I know what it's called: it's called Lymington Mansions, and an incendiary bomb fell on it, and burned two floors" (Ghosh 55)

Through this detailed description of places Amitav Ghosh is apparently showing the power of minute perception in Tridib as well as the working of memory in the mind of the narrator. But this sort of a cartographic representation is also a commentary on the absurdity of the whole concept of map-making. As Benedict Anderson writes in *Imagined Communities* that during the colonial period, the Europeans did "the practice of [...] coloring their colonies on maps with an imperial dye" (Anderson 100) Thus, the whole concept of map-making was nothing but an assertion to claim a particular territory by showing the demarcation of that territory from another. But in the novel, Amitav Ghosh's minute description of the places through the narrator subverts this kind of an assertion and it signifies another crucial aspect- places do not exist on maps. Rather they exist in the memory and imagination of the people. Thus when the narrator went to see the once bombed-out Solent Road in London which Tridib had once mentioned to him, the narrator saw that the place did not conform to that map which he was carrying on in his imagination but it was now a place filled with beautiful trees and concrete houses. The narrator, however, declares that he had obviously not expected to find the road in ruins but through this instance the author had perhaps wanted to demonstrate that places as found in a map may not always correspond to that "map" that one carried in one's imagination.

In the second section of the novel titled as "Coming Home", the author has tried to represent how the concept of nation as existing in the common people's imagination can be dismantled because of the dirty power-play of politics. The

narrator's grandmother can be called to be the representative of those millions of common people around the world who unreasonably suffers because of some unscrupulous decisions such as divisions of a nation undertaken by the people in power. The grandmother who was born and brought up in Dhaka had to move to Calcutta when Dhaka went to East Pakistan in 1947. Years later, when she learned that her Jethamoshai (uncle) was still alive and was living alone in their old house in Dhaka, the grandmother decided to bring the old man "home"- her home in Calcutta which was now in her newly "invented country" (Ghose 137) Still the grandmother could never alienate herself from the memories associated with her birthplace. The family feud between her parents and her uncle's family, the blissful days of her childhood spent with her sister Mayadebi, the streets and shops and lanes of her hometown- all these memories were vividly fresh in her mind. For her, Dhaka always remained her "home" in the true sense, no matter how hard she tried to adjust herself in Calcutta. But despite this sense of homeliness towards her childhood place, still she was suffering from a kind of anxiety when she was preparing herself to visit Dhaka to bring back her Jethamoshai. Through this anxiety, Ghosh is trying to attach another connotation to the idea of "home". Home not only implies that place where one is born or brought up, but it also signifies the familiarity of situations. The grandmother's anxiousness is thus a result of the fear of losing this familiarity. The fact that she might not be able to locate the Dhaka of her childhood after so many years creates a dilemma in her mind whether to visit the place. Similar kind of impediment has also been described by Salman Rushdie in the opening chapter of *Imaginary Homelands*. Rushdie, in this chapter, talks about his hesitancy to visit his old house in Bombay for the fear of not finding the same images of the house which he has been carrying from the memories of his past. The narrator's grandmother in *The Shadow Lines* shows a similar sense of anxiety when she says, "I don't know. I feel scared.[...] It won't be like home anymore." (Ghosh 149) Her apprehensions proved to be true when she arrived Dhaka and the first words that she uttered after immediately landing at the airport were, "Where's Dhaka? I can't see Dhaka." (Ghosh 193) As Rushdie described in *Imaginary Homelands*, this kind of a feeling is inevitably experienced by all those people who are physically alienated from their past and after being alienated from it, the only thing they are left with are "create[d] fictions, not actual cities, or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands..." (Rushdie 10) The luxurious hotels or the cinema halls or the race course of the city could not arouse much excitement in the grandmother because among the glitz and glamour of the city, the Dhaka of her imagination was lost somewhere. It was only when they entered the locality that sights became a little familiar. Even the slightest familiarity of something like a stationary shop at Shador-Bojar therefore moved her to tears. The immense desire to see the past as had been stored in the memory has been brilliantly portrayed by the author when the grandmother refuses to even accept that the signboard of the shop has changed.

If the narrator's grandmother found it difficult to accept that the idea of her "imaginary homeland" no longer exists in 1964 Dhaka, the old Jethamoshai living in Dhaka even refuses to accept the harsh reality of Partition. Even through the eccentricities and hysterical behaviour of the grandmother's uncle Ghosh has very poignantly presented the undying attachment of the old man to his homeland. When the grandmother urges Jethamoshai to come with them to Calcutta, the old man vehemently refuses saying, "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? [...] As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here." (Ghosh 215) The handful of people holding the rein of power decides the fate of millions of people by dividing a nation. However, for the common people whose entire identity is attached to that particular country, can they so easily do away with this association just because of an illusory line drawn between the country? The old man's frustration and anger is thus an outburst of this profound emotional anxiety experienced by the people of a divided nation.

It is in this context that the title of the novel achieves much significance for the "lines" between nations are visible only on maps and globes but they never exist automatically. Thus, the narrator's grandmother is visibly surprised to learn that there were no trenches or soldiers in the border between India and East Pakistan. Through her simple ignorance, Amitav Ghosh has asked a very pertinent question, "But if there aren't any trenches or anything how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference then?" (Ghosh 151) The difference lies just in the mindset of the people. Though the lines are shadowy, illusory and arbitrary, they are enough to create distinctions between the people of two nations. A fixed geographical structure demonstrated in a cartographic representation is enough for the people to consider everyone within that structure to be akin to them and anyone outside the structure to be an alien. Benedict Anderson talks about this concept of nation as an imagined idea, where people voluntarily recognize themselves as the members of that nation despite their cultural, social, economic, religious and all other differences, in the introductory chapter of *Imagined Communities*,

It [nation] is imagined as a community regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willing to die for such limited imaginings. (Anderson 8)

In the novel, the author, through the memories and imagination of his narrator, almost insists upon the readers to ponder over a crucial question- what exactly is a nation? Is it that imaginary picture which is deeply imprinted in the consciousness of people even after learning the country so many years ago, as in the case of the narrator's grandmother? Or is it that fixed geographical structure that the political masters of a nation dictates the common people to believe in? The political system of the country does not take into consideration the emotional attachment of the people towards their homeland while creating a nation. If Benedict Anderson states that a nation created on the basis of the involuntary acceptance of unity among all its members, Salman Rushdie almost annihilates the idea of India as a nation when he asks, "Does India exist?" (Rushdie 27) He very rightly points out that in the thousand years of history of the nation there never existed anything as a united India. At no point in history, no foreign power- be it the Mughals or the British- could spread their dominions over the whole of Indian subcontinent. Thus, according to Rushdie, the entire idea of a place, which never really existed as a unified entity, gaining "freedom" one particular day or being split into two halves was completely absurd. Quite naturally, however, after gaining the status of a sovereign nation, the people of this disunited country submitted themselves to this imaginary entity called "nation". This voluntary submission of all the people is therefore termed as "imagined" by Benedict Anderson "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.” (Anderson 8) Ironically this imagined communion among the people is so strong and powerful that it can compel them to even kill or destroy hundreds of lives for the sake of maintaining the integrity of this illusory nation as witnessed during the wars or the communal riots happening all over the country till date. Amitav Ghosh has brilliantly portrayed the absurdity of such imagined nationalisms through the instance of the narrator looking at the Bartholomew Atlas. While looking at this tattered Atlas used by Tridib, the narrator makes certain wonderful observations of places which shows how political borders and boundaries create narrow nationalistic ideals among people. Geographically a place like Chiang Mai in Thailand was much nearer Calcutta than Delhi is; but politically Delhi and Calcutta forms part of the same nation while Chiang Mai belongs to a different nation altogether. Similarly, Khulna where communal riots first erupted in protest against the theft of the sacred relic Mu-i-mubarak in Srinagar, was quite ironically situated much nearer to Hanoi in Vietnam or to Chinkung in Hong Kong while its distance from Srinagar was around 2000 kilometres. Thus, the lines politically dividing the countries from one another hold little significance as far as the geographical location of places are concerned. No matter how much one attempts to divide nations through borders and fences, the likeliness of one place from its neighbouring region can never be erased. Thus, the narrator says in this context that when the communal riots were happening both in Dhaka as well as Calcutta, the two places belonging to different nations had such likeliness “that I, in Calcutta, had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka...” Both the city were nothing but the “inverted image of the other” separated from each other by a “looking-glass border” (Ghosh 223)

The power of the political connotation of the term “nation” is such that it can create shallow nationalistic tendencies among people. The frenzy of the zealous communalists is demonstrated perfectly in the novel through their acts of communal violence. The brutal killings of Tridib, Jethamoshai and the rickshaw-puller Khalil holds up a pathetic picture showing how ideas like nation, religion or ethnicity are futile and has no meaning. Tridib was inhumanely killed by the mob without any justified reason on his maiden visit to Dhaka. On the other hand, Jethamoshai, who refused to leave his country despite all the atrocities, was killed by his fellow-countrymen simply because of his religion. Even the rickshaw-puller Khalil who despite being a Muslim like those communalists was also killed simply because he was showing a little humanity towards the old man who was a Hindu. Thus, for the narrator’s grandmother the notion of “homeland” does not remain the same after Tridib’s death because the country which she considered her “home” throughout her life snatched away the life of her own nephew for certain vague ideals like nationalism. The nostalgia that she was once carried about her homeland now no longer existed and was replaced by a bitter vengeance against the dirty political system which everytime perpetrated the common people to turn up against one another for narrow selfish interests. The utter disgust with the system finally led to a kind of satisfaction in the grandmother when war broke out between India and West Pakistan in 1971, as she cried out hysterically, “This is the only chance [...] The only one, we’re fighting them properly at last, with tanks and guns and bombs.” (Ghosh 237) In the chapter entitled “The Riddle of Midnight” in *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie very rightly pointed out that if a thing called India doesn’t actually exist, then it is because of one single reason : communalism “The politics of religious hatred.” (Rushdie 27) Nations are created as well as destroyed mostly because of

religious intolerance of its members. India and Pakistan was divided on the basis of religious difference and after almost twenty-five years once again East Pakistan was separated from West Pakistan because of similar communal differences. Nationalism is a positive attitude, no doubt, but there exists a very fine line between nationalism and communalism.

This discussion therefore was an attempt to study the various connotations of nation that has been implied by the author through this novel. The questions that the author has sought to raise regarding concepts like nation, nationalism and communalism has pertinence even in the current-day scenario of India. References to the militant activities in Assam, Tripura, Punjab and others clearly reflects the author's intention of interrogating the validity of such notions like freedom, sovereignty and ethnicity in a diverse country like India. However, the most important aspect discussed in the novel is how the concept of nation existed differently in the consciousness of different characters. The invention, re-invention or dissolution of the idea called nation happened through the power of imagination and memory in all the characters. A nation does not merely imply a particular geographical location where one is born or brought up or lives his life, but it also carries alongwith it a host of significant associations like the sense of belongingness, the claims of tradition and cultural roots, the unforgettable memories of the nation and also the sense of unfaltering love and reverence for the nation. But when the individuals are compelled by the governing body of the nation, it leaves such a deep void in the minds of the individual that can never be filled up completely. The pathos experienced by the people of a divided nation have thus been well-expressed towards the last pages of the novel in the frustrations of Robi, "...why don't they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every little place a new name? [...] How can anyone divide a memory?" (Ghosh 247) In the end, however, it can also be said that though borders create narrow nationalisms among the people but no one can deny the fact that they are indispensable because to aspire for a world without borders and boundaries is to look out for a purely Utopian world. Thus, it can be said that a shadow line drawn between two countries is nothing but a necessary evil.

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