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Remapping 'Nationalism': Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* Re-visited

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Abstract:

'Nationalism' sometimes appears to be a political product where it aims to keep the subject of a nation law-abiding to the prevailing power structure; and if one subscribes to such thoughts, 'nationalism' may inject such magic-substance into one's thinking faculty that s/he starts ceasing to be an individual, and gets transformed into a state-designed political being. But there are also readily obtainable specimens where 'nationalism' has brought about significant benefits including formation of national identity, maintaining political sovereignty etc.

The second part of this paper critically revisits Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines*. While going through the novel, one cannot help but find oneself faced with some troubling questions. Ghosh strives hard to reexamine the concept of 'nationalism' through the microscope of psychological perspectives of various characters. He shows, borders drawn in the name of 'nationalism' miserably fail to divide one's imagination and the sense of association with one's nativity.

Keywords: Nationalism, State, Borders, Internationalism, National identity, Sovereignty, Hatred, Individualism etc.

The primary stumbling block, that one has to face in one's effort to craft a discourse on the subject of 'nationalism', as Anthony H. Birch, a British scholar of international repute, has rightly articulated in his book *Nationalism and National Integration*, is - not having an exclusive founding father of the subject. When one initiates a discussion on the topics like 'communism' or 'conservatism' or 'liberalism', one may commence with the names like Karl Marx or Edmund Burke or John Locke respectively (Birch 13). But the study of 'nationalism' entertains no such opening.

Then crops up the difficulty of having no satisfactorily stable application of the term-'nationalism'. Sometimes it is powerfully used to indicate supreme allegiance to the country. But in such a connotation the most appropriate word should be 'patriotism'. Then at times the term 'nationalism' is employed to imply such muscular belief and supreme self-assurance that your

country or race is better than any other. But in such a proud claim the word that fits best is 'chauvinism' (Birch 4). Hence one has to struggle a lot to overcome the struggle of framing an appropriate definition of the convoluted term 'nationalism'.

Now, down the passage of human civilization in its endeavour to philosophically interpret the relationship between man and all the notions that concern man - the first instance of an effort taken to drop even a hint of 'nationalism', though almost in a roundabout way, came from Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* Rousseau proposes that human beings coming through the gradual transformation from a state of nature into the communal form of organization supported by shared traditions, customs and culture, may feel some kind of exclusive love, affection and fondness for members of that shared society (Barnard 26). Rousseau did not forget to tag the concept of religion with such an ideal state. Rousseau could very well realize that if such an ideal state is to exist, it has to be well tuned with the prevailing religious beliefs of the society. So it is better to have a civil religion which can be expected to promote citizenship and would not challenge the authority of the ruling structure.

After moving so far, probably one may not be comfortable enough to commit oneself to the task of forming a suitable definition of the term 'nationalism'. Ernest Gellner in his outstanding book *Nations and Nationalism* makes a careful effort to form a definition of the term-'nationalism'. Gellner states, "... nationalism is a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones, and, in particular, that ethnic boundaries within a given state - a contingency already formally excluded by the principle in its general formulation - should not separate the power-holders from the rest" (Gellner 2).

So, what Gellner appears to mean is that 'nationalism' is a political product and it aims to keep the subject law-abiding to the prevailing political structure of a state. At this juncture, clearly another term - 'state' - needs to be addressed in order to proceed in our endeavour to understand the social, political and economic implications of the term 'nationalism'.

One can expect some reliable help from Max Weber's thoughts regarding 'state' in this regard. Though his ideas may sound a bit mocking but still its realistic undertone can never be denied. According to Max Weber 'state' is such an agency within a society that holds the monopoly of legitimate violence. In a politically well disciplined society, as it is always known, any individual or sectional violence is illegitimate. The right to apply violence only rests on a clearly well defined, central political authority (Gellner 3).

Another noted thinker Elie Kedourie in his book *Nationalism in Asia and Africa* has tried to summarize his theory of 'nationalism' in the three propositions, "that humanity is naturally divided into nations, that nations are known by certain characteristics which can be ascertained, and that the only legitimate type of government is national self-government" (Kedourie 9).

Kedourie is of the opinion that the influence of ‘nationalism’, down the ages, has been found to be regrettable. Nevertheless, he does admit that ‘nationalism’ is the most popular and influential political doctrine ever promoted, and it has entirely transformed the political map of the world (Kedourie 5). But Kedourie mainly tries to underline the misleading sides of ‘nationalism’ as an ideal. He feels that it is ‘nationalism’ that has disturbed the conventional flow of human thinking. It cannot escape the blame (often labeled against it) that because of ‘nationalism’ the world has witnessed a great deal of violence, revolutions and warfare. Kedourie says, “The attempt to refashion so much of the world on national lines has not led to greater peace and stability. On the contrary, it has created new conflicts, exacerbated tensions, and brought catastrophe to numberless people innocent of all politics” (Kedourie 138).

But is it so easy to deny the immense contribution that ‘nationalism’ has made to the human desires and dreams over the centuries in the world including formation of national identity, safeguarding political sovereignty to a particular community of shared interests? Like many others Anthony Birch cannot entirely agree with Kedourie as far as the effect of ‘nationalism’ on national life is concerned. Birch in his noted book *Nationalism and National Integration*, argues that there are examples across political map of the world where ‘nationalism’ has brought about significant benefits to the people of the nations. Birch takes the example of India to foreground such beneficial aspect of ‘nationalism’. He cites India as an example to support his argument:

Another country that illustrates the benefits of national self-government is India. In the 1950s India appeared fated to suffer repeated famines, as the apparently inevitable expansion of population outstripped the available food supply. In the 1980s this fear has evaporated and India has actually become an exporter of food, No international agency could have secured the compliance of the Indian people with these radical measures; only a party and leader supported by nationalistic feelings of loyalty could have done it. (Birch 33)

In any structured discussion of ‘nationalism’, another term that enjoys an automatic entry is ‘language’. Several times ‘language’ has powerfully established itself as a nutritious supplementary to the perception of ‘nationalism’. J. G. Fitch in his book *Addresses to the German Nation* relates the doctrine of ‘nationalism’ to the linguistic phenomenon of people. Fitch believes that it is the linguistic commonality that conceptualizes ‘nationalism’ among people. “It is true beyond doubt”, Fitch declared, “that, wherever a separate language is formed, there a separate nation exists, which has the right to take independent charge of its affairs and to govern itself” (Fichte 184).

There are other philosophers who are of the view that in a given circumstance it is not possible for an individual to bypass ‘nationalism’ by any means. If any attempt is taken, no matter how seriously, by an individual to escape it, it becomes even more unavoidable. So if someone

wishes to end the impact of 'nationalism' upon him or her, he or she is compelled to go through it. Such a thought is clearly articulated in Terry Eagleton's essay *Nationalism: Irony and Commitment*. Eagleton states that in Raymond Williams' novel *Second Generation*, an African character points out, "Nationalism is in this sense like class. To have it, and to feel it, is the only way to end it. If you fail to claim it, or give it up too soon, you will merely be cheated, by other classes and other nations" (Eagleton 23).

'Nationalism' like 'class' can even appear to be - as articulated by Eagleton in his essay - an 'impossible irony'. Eagleton in his attempt to label 'nationalism' an 'impossible irony' seems to be influenced by the thoughts of Karl Marx. Marx believes that sometimes this truth is forgotten that 'nationalism' like social class is itself a kind of alienation. Marx maintains that it is 'nationalism' that, at one point, slowly but surely rejects the concept of individualism in a society (Eagleton 23). It is, according to Marx, a type of collective anonymity. Marx believes that in order to come out of such alienation, one must not try to avoid 'nationalism'; rather one has to go through it.

Now having arrived at this juncture, in order to shape up one's understanding of 'nationalism', one may assert that 'nationalism' focuses on two fundamental elements - attitude and action.

Firstly, 'nationalism' is meant to evoke an attitude - that the people of a nation is expected to have - to care about their national identity. The attitude is to generate some strong, sometimes maddening sense of boiling emotion among the people to make them feel emotionally attached to their nation.

Secondly, 'nationalism' is supposed to drive the people of a nation, at any cost including even humanity- towards some politically defined and justified action required to achieve or maintain some kind of political sovereignty of a nation.

Now with the limited collection of illumination harvested, so far, from the brief discussion on the subject of 'nationalism', - one may venture to move across Amitav Ghosh's celebrated novel *The Shadow Lines* with the aim of understanding the multilayered implications of the term 'nationalism' thematically treated in the novel with brilliant dexterity.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) stands as one of the most power packed narratives in the South East Asian literature in English in the last quarter of the last century. While going through the novel one cannot help but find oneself faced with some troubling and even sometimes embarrassing questions regarding 'nationalism'. Ghosh, throughout the novel, with a sincere and honest attempt, strives hard to reexamine the very concept of 'nationalism' under the microscope of rational rethinking. Below the surface-texture the novel inwardly carries some tender touch of personal experiences Ghosh underwent during the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 in

Delhi. Ghosh in the essay *The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi* discloses, “Within a few months I started my novel, which I eventually called *The Shadow Lines*, a book that led me backwards in time, to earlier memories of riots, ones witnessed in childhood. It became a book about the meaning of such events and their effects on the individuals who live through them” (Bhattacharjea 204).

As this paper is premeditatedly focused on the complex issues of ‘nationalism’, the extraordinary character of Tha’mma has the most justified claim to be put under the critical lens first. She grew up in Dhaka in the wild days of Indian National Movement. The fiery fever of ‘nationalism’ is fervently prevalent in the air. As a young woman of proud, strong-willed and stubborn mind set, she stands highly charged with such igneous milieu. She idealises the young revolutionaries of the day - so much so that she secretly wishes to join their banned extremist organizations like ‘Anushilan’ and ‘Jugantar’. As a product of Western Educational System her perception of ‘nation’, ‘nationalism’ is quite straightforward, aggressive and forceful. She appears to be entirely obsessed with the Western history which is replete with war-passions, sacrifices, and bloodsheds. Later on at one point she tells her grandson her sharp idea of ‘nationalism’:

It took those people long time to build that country; hundreds of years, years and years of wars bloodshed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood: with their brothers’ blood and their fathers’ blood and their sons’ blood. They know they are a nation because they have drawn their borders with blood. Regimental flags hang on all their cathedrals and their churches are lined with memorials of men who died in wars, all around the world. War is their religion. That is what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this way or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi. They become a family born of the same pool of blood. That is what you have to achieve for India, don’t you see? (Ghosh 58)

It is categorically conspicuous that Tha’mma’s understanding of ‘nationalism’ comes straight from history books. Her nationalistic faiths fail her to realize that her academically nourished perception of ‘nationalism’ may well contradict the individual as well as political realities of the day. Tha’mma considers herself Bengali, but in 1964 when she decides to go back to Dhaka to bring back her ailing uncle, she is faced with some identical crises. While furnishing her personal information in the External Affairs Ministry forms for her visa application, she finds, to her dismay, that she is no more, by her national identity, a ‘Bengali’ but an ‘Indian’ and she is going to a foreign country, not to her ‘motherland’ where she was born and brought up. She is astonished to ponder over how the “place of her birth had come to be messily at odds with her nationality” (Ghosh 111).

Again her idea of ‘nationalism’ is challenged when she learns from her son that she would not be able to trace any border between India and East Pakistan from the plane. But she had expected to find some trenches or soldiers or guns pointing at each other to mark the difference between two

nations, "But surely there's something – trenches perhaps, or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land. Don't they call it no-man's land?" (Ghosh 110).

After receiving a negative and almost mocking reply from her son, the sharp reaction - which she makes - carries unequivocal reflection of her muscular sense of 'nationalism'.

But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference than? And if there's 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 and everything – if there isn't something in between? (Ghosh 110)

Evidently she stands completely perplexed at such an uncomfortable reality which tends to undo her vehement sentiments regarding 'nationalism'. After reaching Dhaka she finds it too difficult to convince her uncle Jethamoshai to go to India. He is a man of strong but unsound nationalistic impulse. As he was born in that country, he wishes to die there as well. No matter how unsafe it turns out to be for him in the extreme heat of blind religious 'nationalism'. But at the same time his own understanding of borders makes them appear very vulnerable. The utter futility of such borders seems to be exposed in his words: "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" (Ghosh 157).

Jethamoshai seems to be not only denying but ridiculing the very relevance of borders in the perception of 'nationalism'. The idea of 'nationalism' which he subscribes to- is something which is deeply related to one's sense of nativity. National or international geographical demarcations, to him, are nothing but some misleading illusions – 'shadow lines'.

As far as Tha'mma's perception of 'nationalism' is concerned, one can see, it takes an even more aggressive shape after the brutal lynching of her nephew Tridib, old Jethamoshai and his sympathetic caretaker Khalil in front of her own eyes. While returning from their ancestral house situated at Jindabaha Lane, Dhaka on their way back to the safe embassy quarters in their chauffeur driven Mercedes in presence of an armed security guard, Tha'mma, Mayadebi, Robi, May and Tridib got threatened in a murderous communal frenzy. Tha'mma and Mayadebi's old and ailing Jethamoshai who would not have agreed to get into their car - was being carried in a rickshaw steered by the Muslim Khalil who had been looking after the helpless old man for long. When the violent mob failed to stop the car, they targeted the helpless old man and innocent Khalil. For the following shocking event, it is better to listen to the words spoken by May. After incessantly suffering from an acute self-burning sense of guilt for 17 years, on the previous night

of the narrator's departure from London, suddenly being stirred by her uncontrolled emotions - May unlocks the mystery of Tridib's murder and describes the grotesque scene to the narrator:

Your grandmother wanted the driver of our car to drive away. She shouted at him to get away, fast. I shouted back at her and got out of the car. Your grandmother screamed at me. She said I didn't know what I was doing, and I'd get everyone killed. I didn't listen; I was a heroine. I wasn't going to listen to a stupid, cowardly old woman. But she knew what was going to happen. Everyone there did, except me. I was the only one who didn't. I began to run towards the rickshaw. I heard Tridib shouting my name. But I kept running. I heard him running after me. He caught up with me and pushed me, from behind. I stumbled and fell. I thought he'd stop to take me back to the car. But he ran on towards the rickshaw. The mob had surrounded the rickshaw. They had pulled the old man off it. I could hear him screaming. Tridib ran into the mob, and fell upon their backs. He was trying to push his way through to the old man, I think. Then the mob dragged him in. He vanished. I could only see their backs. It took less than a moment. Then the men began to scatter. I picked myself up and began to run towards them. The men had melted away, into the gullies. When I got there, I saw three bodies. They were all dead. They'd cut Khalil's stomach open. The old man's head had been hacked off. And they'd cut Tridib's throat, from ear to ear. (Ghosh 182)

Tha'mma's fervent sense of 'nationalism', after such gruesome murders of her relations, grew further and she develops a severe sense of hostility for the Pakistanis. In this respect noted post colonial critic Suvir Kaul's observations are noteworthy, "Perhaps the crowning irony of *The Shadow Lines* is that almost as soon as Tha'mma realizes that the legacy of her birth place is not separable from her sense of herself as a citizen of India, her nephew Tridib's death at the hands of a Dhaka mob confirms in her a pathological hatred of them" (Kaul 283).

After one and a half years of Tha'mma's returning from Dhaka, in 1965, Indo-Pak war begins. At the time of such a national crisis the fire of 'nationalism' has to be very much prevalent in the air of the country; and Tha'mma's hatred - nourished by her sturdy sense of 'nationalism' for Pakistanis - comes to the surface with her spontaneous feelings of strong emotional attachment to the war. One instance that unfailingly underlines the robustness of her 'nationalism' is the fact that she did not mind donating her only necklace, her last reminiscence of her dead husband's love and care - to the war fund quite willingly. After being widowed she stopped wearing her once so fondly collected items of jewellery and gave all of those collection - which she had not yet sold in her previously faced days of crisis - to her daughter-in-law except a long, thin gold chain which she has never parted with: "But there was one piece of jewellery that she had never

parted with. It was a long, thin gold chain with a tiny ruby pendant. It was so much a part of her that I hardly noticed it: she had never taken it off, at least not in my recollection (Ghosh 171).

Even at the time when she was about to undergo her gall-bladder stone operation, she out-rightly refused to take that necklace off. She, later, tried to reason with her grandson, "I haven't taken it off once in these thirty-two years – not even when I had my gall-bladder operation. They wanted me to take it off, but I made them sterilise it instead. I wasn't going to have my operation without it. It's become a part of me now (Ghosh 171)

But during the war between India and Pakistan in 1965 all her frozen hatred for Pakistanis, born out of her pathetic experience of witnessing the brutal lynching of her dear ones and conditioned by her forceful perception of 'nationalism',- comes to the surface when she gave it away to the war fund. She screamed at 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." (Ghosh 172)

Now Tridib's perception of nation, 'nationalism', 'borders' are just contrary to the aggressive ideas which Tha'mma holds tight. He is a man who believes in the spirit of internationalism. Borders and map fail to carry any real substance to him. He is an advocate of a border-free world where one can enjoy exclusive freedom of living with others in true spirit of love and harmony. The narrator appears highly influenced by his uncle Tridib's concepts of the power of one's imagination and desire:

I knew that the sights Tridib saw in his imagination were infinitely more detailed, more precise than anything I would ever see. He said to me once that one could never know anything except through desire, real desire, which was not the same thing as greed or lust; a pure, painful and primitive desire, a longing for everything that was not in oneself, a torment of the flesh, that carried one beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and other places, and even, if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror. (Ghosh 23)

The tragic relation between Tridib and May Price is a powerful denial of nationalistic demarcation. Though Tridib's letter for May of their proposed meeting in a strange place may, at the surface level, seem to be a steamy portrayal of pornographic scene, but at the deeper level, it is a piece of philosophical understanding of one's longing for freedom – freedom from past, freedom from one's national identities, freedom from the burden of history and freedom from all those things which threaten to poison one's individual perception and existence. Ghosh wonderfully projects the letter from the narrator's perspective: "But he did know that that was how he wanted to meet her as the completest of strangers – strangers across the seas all the more

strangers because they knew each other already. He wanted them to meet far from their friends and relatives – in a place without a past, without history, free really free, two people coming together with utter freedom of strangers” (Ghosh 105).

Novy Kapadia in his review article – *The Metaphor of The Shadow Lines in Amitav Ghosh’s Novel* – rightly points out as: “It implies that he wants to meet May, without the burden of history, without any expectations or pre-condition or any divisive shadow lines. May initially thinks that such as a letter is intrusion of her privacy but then succumbs to curiosity and decides to visit India and meet Tridib.” (Kapadia 256)

Therefore Tha’mma’s narrow, shallow perspective of ‘nationalism’ is powerfully challenged by the broader and realistic perspectives of internationalism held by the spirit of cross-border relationship between Tridib and May. It is wildly thoughtless religious ‘nationalism’ that draws the tragic end of Tridib and May’s wonderful shared dream. Had Tridib and May been married, it would have been an excellent instance of breaking through the barriers of racial and cultural boundaries. It is the narrator who comes out to be the present true flag-bearer of his uncle Tridib’s ideology of universal citizenship.

The novel moves back and forth and the events do not follow a chronological order. The past, present and future, in the novel, blend and dissolve into such a profound realism where frontiers of time and place fail to make any substantial demarcation. The treatment of time and space in this novel takes one to an understanding where they stand absolutely inseparable and it also questions the traditional divisions of these two entities. Such an understanding is echoed in the words of Meenakshi Mukherjee: “Time in this novel can be illusory and concrete at the same time and likewise space can be fluid even when held solidly within the concrete scaffolding of a house or confirmed within the firm outlines etched national boundaries on a map” (Mukherjee 267)

So if one goes by the conventional sense of ‘nationalism’, it may inject such a magic-substance in one’s blood that he/she will start ceasing to be an individual, and get transformed into a state-designed political being; and space for individual thoughts gets narrowed to the level where it seems almost swallowed by so called national interest manufactured and proclaimed by state political structure. Ghosh is painfully aware of this well designed phenomenon to the very essence of his understanding. In this context Murari Prasad’s observation in his essay *The Shadow Lines: A Quest for Indivisible Sanity* is noteworthy:

The Shadow Lines as a seminal piece of fiction, does bring out the rare and remarkable talent of Ghosh, who passionately searches for strategies for survival in a violent, hate filled world of narrow divisions and finds in love the enabling and productive action to tide over separatist propensities of communities and

nationality groups. The novel addresses the challenge of geographical fluidity and cultural dislocations with a new consciousness and firm grasp of socio-cultural and historical materials. The experience of aliens and immigrants in post-colonial setting furnishes us with the clue to the novel's larger borders and adjustment with the altered face of the world. (Prasad 91)

Ghosh has in *The Shadow Lines* made an honest attempt to put the term 'nationalism' under the lens of universal values irrespective of time, space, national identity. Kavita Dahiya's remark in her work, *No Home But in Memory: Migrant Bodies and Belongings, Globalisation and Nationalism in The Circle of Reason and The Shadow Lines* stands highly relevant in this context:

The Shadow Lines reveals the fragility of partition borders between nations as etched out in maps, and of the frontiers policed by nation states that separate people, communities and families. However, Ghosh does this not to celebrate globalization but to argue that communities are transnational, through the work of historical memory. He suggests that the nature of boundaries can be understood through the metaphor of the looking glass: the national border between the people of India and West Pakistan resembles the mirror's boundary, in which self and reflected other are the same (joined in visual and corporal simultaneity). Therefore, in Ghosh's narrative, the borderline cannot destroy the fundamental identity of people on both sides of the boundary or render him changed into 'the other'. (Dahiya 57)

Ghosh emphatically seems to be articulating that in 21st century when the concept of imperialism and colonialism has changed its traditional colour and implications, within the suffocating cells of thoughtless 'nationalism' - demarcated by national frontiers and maintained by power structures of different nations - there may be states and citizens well accommodated but not people of free mind and free spirit, and the narrator does reach such an insight, "It seemed to me, then, that within this circle there were only states and citizens; there were no people at all" (Ghosh 169).

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