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Cartography with Melting Borders: Post-nationalism in Amitav Ghosh's the *Shadow Lines*

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines is a celebratory problematization of the discourse of nationalism in the historical backdrop of World War II, Indo-China (1962) and Indo-Pak (1965) War, Indian Independence, the Partition and the riots in East-Pakistan and Calcutta. Aligned with Benedict Anderson's theorisation on construction of nation as 'an imagined political community-imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign...rather than an inevitable product of sociological factors such as common language, race, religion, and history', Ghosh is here seen to argue the futility of the flawed ideology of nationalism which, in a crucial way, is thought to have been operative behind the politics of partition of this country. However, history over the years in the aftermath of partition has ironically proved that partition-the process of drawing lines of demarcation or dissection essentially on the basis of 'race, religion, language, a community of interest or geography'- in lieu of being a solution has turned out to be a churning cauldron of fresh imbroglios that always brew up violence as an inseparable by-product.

The present paper zeroes in on Ghosh's polemical fictionalization of the popular contemporary cultivation of nationalism as a 'pro-citizen' ideology and his proposition for an evolution towards melting of those lines which define, essentially in a faulty way, a nation not only in maps but also in people's imagination.

Key-words: Discourse, Nationalism, Nation, Partition, Ideology, Evolution;

Introduction:

The non-sequential arrangement of the narrative that toys with memory and imagination of the characters and the readers as well has its story focalised mostly through an anonymous narrator, though every so often other characters too participate in unravelling some momentous events or experiences that conduce the novel achieve its artistic unity. The novel begins in 1939 prior to the birth of the narrator who introduces himself as 'I' and it

incorporates several incidents up to the late 1970s. The story, bifurcated respectively as 'Going away' and 'Coming home', engages three generations of characters pertaining to three families-two Calcutta-based families in which two sisters, the Grandmother and Mayadebi, both born and brought up in Dhaka, had got married and one British family, friend to the other two. What the narrator recounts turns out to be, even in the non linear course of the novel, the trajectory of his maturation from some spurious childhood faith in 'truth of the precepts' to his almost epiphanic revelation in the adulthood about the non-presence of the 'line' which is both 'an absurd illusion and a source of terrifying violence'. Crucial here is also the understanding of the idiosyncratic attitude of variegated characters towards the social, political, and cultural realities like home, sexuality, nation, nationalism, partition etc which are inextricable components to the structuralization of identity not of a citizen only but of an entire community also.

Grandmother: Uprooted citizen, Rooted Nationalist

The Grandmother whom the narrator calls 'Thamma' and Tridib, narrator's uncle, are two such characters who though antithetical to each other establish the narrator's as well as the text's ideological rationale for the critique of nationalism. Thamma represents the patriarchal militant-nationalism prevalent during colonial period. That an ideal nation could be constructed only by the sinewy youths of a country is her notion which, needless to say, excludes the women having any chance for contribution in nation-building. Her firm conviction is 'You can't build a strong country ...without building a strong body.' (P-8) Perhaps that view of her explains why she has been so much keen on identifying herself with Robi, her sister Mayadebi's son, who was even at his age of nine above and beyond 'strong'. 'Watch Robi, he's strong, he's not like the rest of you in this country.'(P-35) She takes pride in Robi's virility even if sometimes it amounts to violence and fantasises her romantic affinity with the terrorist movements amongst nationalists in Bengal in the first few decades of the twentieth century. She could not relate the 'shy bearded boy' of his class to the terrorist-revolutionist whom she always fascinates as 'a huge man with burning eyes and a lion's mane of a beard'. (P-39) Establishment of a nation, in her view, always necessitates bloodshed and even that too exclusively of its male inhabitants. When she talks about the formation of English nation this is what she has to say: 'It took those people a long time to build that country; hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood: with their brother's blood and their father's blood and their son's blood. They know they are a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood.' (P-78) The same belligerent mindset is invoked by her for the unification of this country too: 'War is their religion. That's what it takes to make country. Once that happens people forget they were born that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they became a family born of the same pool of blood. That is what you have to achieve for

India...'(P-78) However this belligerence, thought as a constitutive force by Thamma, gets almost a hysterical aggravation after the death of Tridib, her nephew, in 1964 riot in Dhaka. She donates her only gold chain, a prized gift from her husband, to fund the 1965 war and this time her frenzied preoccupation with the war is worth quoting: 'We have to kill them before they kill us; we have to wipe them out' or 'This is the only chance...The only one. We are fighting them properly at last, with tanks and guns and bombs.' (P-237) Her psychasthenic attempt to wound herself and get her blood spilled to donate it to the war fund is perhaps the culmination of her eagerness to participate in the formation of her ever-cherished blood-soaking nationalism.

Thamma has equally been obsessed with the physical existence of the 'borders' or 'frontiers'. In her first ever 'going' (or 'coming'!) home at Dhaka she eagerly expects to watch from the plane those 'lines' which vivisect India and East Pakistan for she thinks '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 a no-man's-land?'(P-151) On being informed that there's no such physical barriers in actual, she is visibly disappointed and asks what seems to be even more serious concern for her: '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 sides will be the same; it'll be just like it used to be before...what was it all for then- partition and all the killing and everything-if there's not something in between?'(P-151)It is her sheer faith on 'borders', 'difference' or her reluctance to accept the sameness between the two countries that lead her to bring back her Jethamoshai to Calcutta: 'poor old man...Imagine what it must be like to die in another country, abandoned and alone in your old age.'(P-136) Ironically Thamma's journey home peels her dogmatic romanticizations of borders, home, partition and ultimately of nationalist faith as she finds 'how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality' (P-152) and discovers what in her childhood she used to think of as 'everything is upside down' (P-125) in the other side of their Dhaka house, is in actual 'nothing's upside down' (P-212) there. Thamma perhaps gets to know, as Suvir call points out, 'that borders have a tenuous existence, and that not even a history of bloodshed can make them real and impermeable.'(P-279)

Tridib: Celebration of Cosmopolitism

The hegemonic discourse of nationalism based on the essentialist principle of binaries or separated identities as laid out by the 'borders' on either side of it, has ostensibly been destabilized by Ghosh through the character of Tridib. He is, in many ways, Ghosh's celebration of border-free citizenhood. From the very beginning of the narrative Tridib is pitted against what Thamma actually stands for. It is not just his gastric-ridden health or his wayward hobnobbing with street boys at Gole Park or his not doing 'any proper work' (despite pursuing PhD in archaeology) that set him apart from Thamma's credo. The text

substantively puts forth that Tridib with his innate faculty of imagination is capable of annulling those 'lines' which contribute to Thamma's feeling of 'rootedness' to a particular land even though within her own psychic-world. The narrator, despite his Thamma's antipathy towards Tridib, feels anchored in him primarily because of his that faculty of imagination which he gets educated with by Tridib himself: 'Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with' (P-20) On Tridib's tattered old Bartholomew's Atlas, the narrator learns 'a place does not merely exist...it has to be invented in one's imagination'.(P-21) This imaginative 'invention' is as beyond Thamma as it is beyond Ila who, as Tridib says, despite having lived in many places 'had never travelled at all'.(P-21) This imagination, almost of a mystical kind, has the power to carry 'one beyond the limits of one's mind to the other times and other places, and even, if one was lucky, to place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror.'(P-29).However years after Tridib's death on the same tattered Bartholomew Atlas the narrator finds a number of truths revealed to him. He finds himself that 'lucky' to discover Dhaka, a city beyond the 'borders' as merely the mirror image of Calcutta; In fact he realizes each city to be 'the inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free-our looking glass border' (P233) Mirror image has pervasively been exploited all through the novel to discover the mutual closeness in apparently paradoxical relationship between time, space and persons. The disappearance of the sacred relic from the Hazratbal mosque which used to be visited equally by Hindus and Muslims along with other religious communities in Srinagar, ironically becomes the reason for sparking off communal riots in 'Muslim Dhaka' and 'Hindu Calcutta'. Tridib is murdered in the riot which gets mirrored in Calcutta where the narrator, who contemplates himself to be the mirror image of Tridib, finds himself trapped as a child in the violence hurled by the same reason.

However, in the narrator, this renewed venture with Tridib's Bartholomew's Atlas produces epiphanic 'inventions'; a naive experiment with a rusty compass on the Atlas metamorphoses all his childhood faith in the 'truth of the precepts'; 'I believed in the reality of space; I believed that distance separates, that it is a corporeal substance; I believed in the reality of nations and borders; I believed that across the border there existed another reality. The only relationship that my vocabulary permitted between those separate realities was war or friendship.'(P-219)He discovers that despite having etched borders on the map, 'they had created not a separation...' The real fact is 'they' could not. No less important is the narrator's revelation that the state monopolizes all personal relationships between peoples and reduces them to 'citizens' because within the circumference called 'nation' there are 'only state and citizen, no people at all'. The novel, unlike Forster's *A Passage to India*, eulogizes personal relationships spanning over generations beyond colonial watershed and borders through friendship, love and even wedlock.

The Shadow Lines appears to idealise Tristan's love story Snipe told Tridib in the celler in 1939. 'It was the story of a hero called Tristan, a very sad story, about a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman-across-the-sea...' (P-186) Tridib addresses May in his letters as 'my love-across-the-seas'. (P-175) In fact even more worth reckoning about the story is 'It happened everywhere, wherever you wish it...' (P-186) The story, however, allusively casts Tridib as a 'man without country', what, by dint of his instinctive imagination, he already has been and perhaps insinuates his imminent tragic assassination because of xenophobia- the crudest form of nationalism. The billets-doux sent by Tridib for May are vehemently expressive of his fascination for a border free universe. He asks May to meet in '...a place without past, without history, free really free...' (P -144) Suvir Kaul therefore quite justifiably observes in his essay *Separation Anxiety: Growing up Inter/National in The Shadow Line*s that 'If by the end of the novel, May has learned to think of Tridib's death as a sacrifice, it is because Tridib, in his memory of the Tritan story, is 'a man without a country', a man whose imagination and cross-cultural identifications enable him to think beyond frontier limits.'(P-284)

Ila: Anxiety of Westernized Indianness

The narrative, as it pointedly hinges on the issue of critiquing nationalism, employs multiple voices which are independent of authorial imposition of ideological control. Ila a self-proclaimed 'free woman and free spirit' practically abhors the thought of being in India and adopts cosmopolitism just because she wants freedom in her sense of the term. It seems, for more than a single reason, that she represents the Western epistemological hegemony over history. She blatantly eulogizes, surprisingly in the same manner as grandmother, warfare and 'heroism' in 'pointless deaths' both of which she fascinates as the processes of being a part of the history; she says, almost disdainfully, to the narrator living in India 'I know ...that you've spent your whole life living safely in middle-class suburbs in Delhi and Calcutta. You can't know what this kind of happiness means: there's a joy merely in knowing that you're a part of history.'(P-104) She extends her acerbity and remarks quite authoritatively: 'you wouldn't understand the exhilaration of events like that –nothing really important ever happens where you are.' Understandably Ila's study in history in University College, London comes here in difficult terms with the narrator's personal experience. She takes the epistemic upper hand to the extent of commenting that 'Well of course there are famines and riots and disasters...But those are local things after all-not like revolution or anti-fascist wars'. (P-104) Instead Ila registers her genuine concern in the history of 'those 'thirties lefties' in the Berlin bars. That the riots like some famines or disasters are left unattended as 'local events' by the westernized Indian Ila, triggers the narrator to conceive a purer truth about her and the like: 'But still I had known people of my own age, who had survived the Great Terror in the Calcutta of the sixties and 'seventies and I thought I had at least a spectator's knowledge of

their courage, something that Ila, with her fine clothes and manicured hands, would never understand'.(P-105)

Robi: *un*-national Bureaucrat

As the narrator realizes the stark futility of the arbitrary or invented 'lines' in transforming the other side of it into 'an inverted image' or 'another reality', Robi utters his scathing agony over 'lines' since he experiences that those lines never ensure 'freedom' to the common mass in any possible sense of the term. Being an administrative executive he has to give orders once in a while to his policemen even to the extent of killing common people in order to establish or protect, ironically enough, 'our unity and freedom'. He says: 'When I was running a district I used to look at those pictures and wonder sometimes what I would do if it were happening in my area. I know what I have to do; I'd have to go out and make speeches to my policemen saying: You have to be firm, you have to do your own duty. You have to kill whole village if necessary-we have nothing against people, it's the terrorist we want to get, but we have to be willing to pay a price for our unity and freedom.'(P-246) Robi is warned by the terrorists with such stern threatening as 'we have to kill you for our freedom'. So both the state and the terrorist groups aim at 'freedom' according to their divergent sense of the term. Even after the Independence and the Partition, the nation itself is uncannily divided on the meaning of 'freedom'. Now, interesting to note is that Robi, himself a part of the state-power, observes that this state-sponsored genocide has no variance with the terrorist's assassinations and he thinks them to be the mirror image of each other. His sarcastic comment on the 'lines' is remarkable in this regard: 'And then I think to myself why don't they draw thousands of little lines through the whole sub-continent and give every little place a new name? What would it change? It's a mirage; the whole thing is a mirage. How can anyone divide a memory?'(P-247) In the light of Robi's contemplation it becomes logically clear how *The Shadow Lines* is inescapably concerned with the 'meaning of political freedom in the modern world and the force of nationalism.'

Conclusion:

It is awfully engaging that the riot which is mortally and perpetually ingrained in the psyche of a mickle section of citizenship in both side of the border, gets a cursory attention and then vanishes from the 'collective imagination of responsible opinion' in this nation-state. *The Shadow Lines* in its sincerity towards the humanity at large articulates this 'silence of voiceless events' and by doing so it aptly foregrounds the death of the jingoistic nationalism. Nivedita Majumdar has pointedly accentuated this aspect of the novel: 'In locating the critique of nationalism in an alternative view of history that itself is derived from the often silenced voices of the nation, *The Shadow Lines* pitches the nation against nationalism.' Ernest Renan's prognosis in his seminal essay 'What is Nation?' that 'Nations are not

something eternal. They had their beginnings and they will end' may be said to have come partly true in terms of economic globalisation. Frontiers at the political level seem to be too formidable to exist perennially.

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