

Gandhi's Theory of Nation in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to trace Mahatma Gandhi's theory of nation in Amitav Ghosh's well-known novel *The Shadow Lines*. Today, the world looks to be in *anari* hands. The clouds of Third world war are not gone yet. Everyone is performative nationalism. In such a tense atmosphere, it is imperative to look back at Mahatma Gandhi as a theorist, who has his original and genuine views about nation and nationalism. He never favours that the citizens' loyalty be judged by their stance over performative nationalism. Today's world, in fact, resembles the background when Gandhi put his critique of the aggressive version of nation and nationalism, which gained popularity in early 20th century. Recently USA and the countries of European Union have come ahead to destroy Ukraine indirectly, and Russia is destructing it with direct attacks. In this frenzied ambience, it is an appropriate context to go back and look at some of Gandhi's ideas and ideals as the situation of all such conflict lies in his ideas.

John Huizinga, a Dutch cultural historian, argues in his book *Men and Ideas* (1984) that the notion of nationalism, becomes a potent force to dominate by the later 19th and early 20th century. At the time, an urge to have one's own nation, one's own state and to assert itself at others' cost. This kind of aggression on in the name of nationalism was noticed in Indian also at that time. This aggressiveness of the notion of nationalism created furor among the contemporaneous intellectuals across the globe. In India, it has

been Mahatma Gandhi, who has critiqued the contemporary nationalism. He is quite new in his approach towards critiquing contemporary nationalism while moving above the narrowness of the idea of national, Gandhi brings the idea of internationalism within the fold of nationalism. He broadens its horizon and makes it more assimilative and tolerant.

The following statement of Gandhi candidly demonstrates how he establishes the essential harmony and balance between the seemingly contradictory notions of nationalism and internationalism:

The individual has to die for the family, the family has to die for the village, the village for the district, the district for the province, and the province for the country, even so a country has to die, if necessary, for the benefit of the world. (Desai 170)

In this way, we see that in the eyes of Mahatma Gandhi, “it is not the nationalism that is evil, it is the narrowness, selfishness, exclusiveness which is the bane of modern nations which is evil” (Young India). *Hind Swaraj* (1909), Gandhi’s masterpiece, presents the aforementioned idea of nationalism. As we look at the very title, it is not just about swaraj i.e self-rule rather it is about ‘Hind’ i.e India, which is a “nation”. When he was writing it, he was entirely conscious of those who had been valorizing violence and aggression in the name of nation and he wished to address them. He addresses some basic questions about Indian nation and nationalism in *Hind Swaraj*. Commencing with the first question, he condemns all those are of the view that prior to British rule, India was not a nation. Such type of people come to believe that it was the British who for the first-time part together the scattered and hostile regions and communities of the subcontinent by winning it entirely and establishing what is known as “Pax Britannica” or “peace of the British empire”. But Gandhi very systematically critiques all such assumptions. He categorically puts forth that India has been a nation since time immemorial many years before the advent of British in India. It is quite obvious from two inherent virtues of Indian civilization- its accommodating capacity and the existence of certain places of pilgrimage found across India.

Gandhi believes that in order to be designated as a nation, a country must have the accommodating capacity. The people who wish to be called as a nation ought to have the sense of being a community in spite of the differences amongst them as individuals. Benedict Anderson's ideas of nation as "imagined community" is anticipated in Gandhi. No any other civilization, says Gandhi, has shown such a great accommodating capacity as Indian civilization has done. Since time immemorial, it has kept absorbing different cultures and religions from different countries. All have got mixed up into its fold. Gandhi uses the term "praja" meaning "subject", instead of "rashtra" meaning "nation". He does this because while "rashtra" implies some idea of power, "praja" signifies the idea of people or community. Further, he also uses the concept of "sama" – occasional gatherings – to stress the accommodating temperament of Indian nation. Anthony J. Parel opines that when Gandhi uses the word "sama" he goes very near to Renan's idea of "fusion". Ernest Renan argues the "fusion of people" has been an essential condition for the construction of nations in Europe.

Coming to another aspect, Gandhi also deals with the pertinent issue of the relationship of religion and language to the idea of nation. Some people have opined at that time that India will not be "one" nation as soon as the British rule is over in India. This is largely due to the presence of the multi-religion outfits in India. They are still present in our country. Gandhi, however, believes that India has a nice opportunity in this matter to put a new model before the world. He says, "India cannot to be one nation simply because belonging to different religion live in it" (Hind 42-43).

In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh problematizes the home and nation in his search for identity. Further, the text subverts notions of truth that are rooted in cultural, sociological and historical realities while it exposes the arbitrariness of many kinds of lines, borders both personal and political. This novel can be best read as a novel that interrogates a political consciousness of home and nation baptized in the crucible of national divides. This novel is more somber, less fanciful in its politics, and quite stunning in the power with which its formal experiments in sequence and location resonate thematically. *The Shadow Lines* traces nearly a half-century of

interlocking relations among three generations of two families, one Indian (Bengali) and one British. It is the story of the family and friends of the nameless narrator, which has its roots in broader national and international experience. In the novel, the past, the present and the future combine and melt together erasing any kind of line of demarcations. The text deals with the concerns of our period, the search for identity, the need for independence, the difficult relationship with colonial culture.

In this novel, Amitav Ghosh explores the ideas of home and nationhood, ideas that involve relationships between individuals belonging to the same or to different communities that sometimes transgress and transcend the shadow lines of political borders. *The Shadow Lines* probably represents Ghosh's most direct confrontation with nationalism and national identity through the concept of home and it is simultaneously about each character's personal identity. Both in Political Science and Geography there is a specific definition of a country or a state. The word 'Country,' however, bears a specific meaning to a man. A man's entire entity of present, past as well as future is associated with his own country or native land or homeland. In general, the part of land where one is born becomes one's homeland, native land or motherland. Within the parliamentary system, it is a rule that a country will keep up the rights of people of that country but when the state is unable to bear the responsibility of a man, his whole entity is at stake. On the background of that crisis, Amitav Ghosh writes an invaluable novel *The Shadow Lines*.

The narrator's grandmother conforms to the popular idea of nation for her it is a clear marker of identity. She is a votary of the nation in a sense in which none of the other character is. In fact, she represents a legitimate view of the nation against which the viewpoints of others like those of Tridib, Ila and the narrator, may be perceived. Though she lives in the frozen past, the reality of nationhood is largely stable in her case. For her idea of home and nation with regard to family are located in one political unit that is why she worries about her old uncle living alone in Bangladesh. She tells her son,

It doesn't matter whether we recognize each other

or not. We are the same flesh, the same blood, the same bone and now at last, after all these years, perhaps we'll be able to make amends for all that bitterness and hatred (SL 129).

It is clear that she cares for the ties of blood which congruent with nationhood, and is prepared to let go the bitter memories of family feuds. Her quest for freedom is, obviously, a quest for attaining nationhood; and she is prepared to pay any price for it. However, Tha'mma thinks that Ila does not understand the true spirit of England, and, so, does not have the right to be staying there.

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're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood (SL 78).

Her militant nationalism comes out clearly, when she explains the creed of Englishmen and relates it to the Indian context, thus:

War is their religion. That's what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this 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? (SL 78).

For her the political boundaries of nation are there to protect the citizens living within them and whenever the boundaries of nation are in the danger of being violated by other nations it is the duty of citizens to contribute in all possible manners. When India is attacked by China, she gives away her cherished necklace, the first gift that she had received from her husband after her marriage, for the war fund in 1965. She justifies her action to her grandson, saying:

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.' And she continues, 'this is the only chance [...]. The only one. We're fighting

them properly at last, with tanks and guns and bombs (SL 237).

Tha'mma's sense of nation receives two severe blows when she undertakes a rescue mission to Dhaka to bring back her Jethamoshai to India. Before her departure she wonders whether she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the window of the plane, to which her son sarcastically replies that did she think that the border would actually be a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other as in a school atlas! True, her response to the question of the border is native, but her expectation to find trenches or soldiers or guns pointing at each other or even no-man's land there, makes sense. But when she is told that she should expect clouds, and at the most some green fields, she is simply amazed, and her natural and forthright response is:

But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference then? And if there's no difference both sides will be the same; it'll 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? (SL 151)

The second jolt to Tha'mma's concept of home and nation comes from Jethamoshai who still considers Tha'mma's family as his biggest enemy. After partition, he allowed the Muslims who were displaced from India to occupy his house and lives with one Muslim family that takes care of him it is contrary to his nature because there was a time when he did not allow even the shadow of a Muslim fall on his house. However now the unknown people have become his family and the family members have become aliens.

It is in the context of this traumatic experience that the author learns a new meaning of 'distance'. He understands that space meant extension, but through his immediate experience, he learns that spaces can be interrelated through mutual discord or mutual concern, irrespective of distance. The theft of the relic at Hazartbal Mosque can be used as an illustration to clarify this idea.

It concerned Hindus and Muslims alike. The targets of the rioters were not people, neither Hindus nor Muslims nor Sikhs but property identified with the government and the police. However, at Khulna in East Pakistan a demonstration in protest against the theft of the relic had turned violent, triggering violence in the neighboring towns and Dhaka. Subsequently, even Calcutta had erupted. Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely related to each other than it had been before, so that the narrator had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka. These areas were locked into an irreversible symmetry through patterns of mutual discord and mutual concern of the people, on both sides of the border. Likewise, Robi suffers the consequences of the nation in disarray, though in a much more poignant way. His elder brother, Tridib, was killed in a riot in Dhaka, and he happened to be a mute witness to this gory incident. The most poignant section of the text is the account of Tridib's death, given fifteen years after the event for the first time by his brother Robi. Robi has been revisited by the same nightmare for long years and he tells it in a powerful and uneasy mix of dream and unreality. "If only that dream would go away, I would be like other people; I would be free. I would have given anything to be free of that memory' (SL 246).

A chance remark by a Bangladeshi waiter in a cheap restaurant in London had opened up floodgates of anguished memories in Robi's mind. Subsequently Robi, the narrator and Ila stand together. This heart-rending cry of pain and helplessness should render meaningless, practically, all carefully constructed theories of the nation. The heart of darkness, the centre of the mob towards which Tridib fearlessly walks swallows not just Tridib but all sense of sanity and discretion that makes human beings humane. In the context of the painful death of his brother,

Robi muses on the word 'free', and finds it to be a 'mirage'. As one who was entrusted with the job of running a district, he would have given orders for the killing of the terrorists if they were operating there-that was the price they should be willing to pay for preserving their unity and freedom, he told his officers. Moreover, when he went home, he found an anonymous letter, waiting for him. It said:

We're going to get you, nothing personal, we have to kill you for our freedom. It would be like reading

my own speech transcribed on a mirror. And then I think to myself why don't they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every little place a new name? What would it change? It is mirage; the whole thing is a mirage. How can anyone divide a memory? (SL 246-47)

Freedom then is a 'mirage'. If freedom were possible through killings, then Tridib's death would have set him free. However, the fact is that a chance remark by a waiter in a restaurant sets his hand shaking like a leaf, fifteen years after the gruesome act, thousands of miles away in another continent. Even the division and subdivision of the continent cannot change the dismal situation.

The various sections of *The Shadow Lines* reiterate that personal freedom is curiously connected with political realities that are often divisive and disruptive; and, so, no freedom is unequivocal. Freedom for one set of people is attained at the cost of others and thus notions of freedom along with Home and Nation are both vague and shadowy. Notions of liberty are like shadow lines, sometimes shadowy and mirage-like, but often, real and rigidly drawn. The borders or the shadow lines are not always possible to perceive from the window of a plane but they are impossible to transgress without causing violence and bloodshed. The contradictions inherent in the term 'nation' are projected through the complex form of this novel. Although the nation is crucial to the conceptualization, scope and structure of *The Shadow Lines*, somewhere along the way it becomes an elusive and shadowy entity, as the principal protagonists in the drama are unable to make sense of its resonant contradictions. The grandmother who had passionately clung on to her space in the historical narrative, and who understands the forces of history-seeing them as catalysts of social change, is dead; and the younger persons in the novel are unwilling to take on the mantle at this stage. They want to be individuals rather than be aggressive citizens, with unconditional allegiance to the nation-state. Ila, Robi and the narrator-different versions of the post-colonial Indian, try to grapple with the questions of Home and Nation in their own diverse ways. Although they believed the boundaries between nations to be the shadow lines, they found them precipitating divisiveness and violence.

The structure of the novel is a complex jigsaw puzzle carefully crafted with its pieces seemingly strewn about with haphazard randomness. Both the narrator and the reader discover through this artistic form that the world is not a simple place that can be seen in an atlas. Though the solid lines that divide the nations may not be clearly visible, they are in fact an inexorable fact, as they lead to political aggression and violent bloodshed.

Many postcolonial thinkers like Pratt and Ashcroft address cultural space more specifically in terms of colonial and postcolonial tensions; however, this study focuses on geo-political strife as well as harmony among divergent ethnic groups in India in contemporary times. Amitav Ghosh concentrates on the dynamics of cultural space that his characters attempt to understand not merely as a cause of disagreement of territorial conflict and cultural clash, but instead, as a point of connection and conjunction, too. Construction of cultural space in Ghosh's novels does not simply manifest territorial struggles, rather, it serves to show the interplay between local and global influences, national and transnational reconfigurations and above all the search for community and alliances that cut across boundaries of cultural and ethnic identity. Therefore, the cultural dimension of Nation is important to understand the representation of space in the novels because Ghosh's narrators compel the reader to imagine space above the narrow confines of a singular culture, nation, territory and community.

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