

Nationalism a Boon or a Bane in Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract

Nationalism is the love, the dedication, the zeal for one's country. Thamma a strong nationalist is critical of Tridib for she feels that he wastes his time. She is critical of Ila as she cannot tolerate that Ila should feel at home in London. She believes in national borders that motivate her to bring her old uncle Jethamoshai to India from Dhaka but unfortunately he is killed by a violent mob. Ila's sense of nationalism derives from the personal freedom that a nation can give her. She does not like the weight of national culture and tradition. On the contrary the narrator believes in nation and national borders, the security that a nation offers. Robi and May seek for psychological freedom. They do not believe in defining themselves by the parameter of nationality rather see themselves as a global one. Tridib's notion of nationalism is also transnational. Through a union with May he wants to wipe all borderlines. Thus *The Shadow Lines* presents a study of nationalism from the various points of view suggesting that the notions of nationalism can be very difficult to define.

Keywords: Nationalism, Globalization, Socialism, Revolution, Tradition

Rahul Sapra says with the collapse of Soviet socialism, nationalism has once more appeared on the agenda of world affairs. However nationalism, which was once considered Europe's gift to the world and till the 1960's it was regarded as the moving force behind anti-colonial struggle in Asia and Africa, is now considered, from one point of view, to be a force of destruction; a threat to the world peace. Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* questions a similar kind of nationalism. Thamma, the narrator's grandmother, wanted to participate actively in the revolutionary struggle which was going on in her school days. She was brought up on the stories of freedom fighters like Khudiram Bose and Bagha Jatin. She wanted to work for the revolutionaries or at least "to cook their food, wash their clothes [or] anything" (S.L.39) that would give her a chance to assist them. When Thamma grows older, her nationalist loyalty motivates her towards the task of nation building. She wants to create

The Creative Launcher

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Vol. I & Issue IV

an ideal India that is based on hard work and duty. She doesn't like Tridib, because she believes that he is wasting his time on a Ph.D. Thamma believes that if Tridib does not waste his time and works hard then he can live "like a lord and run the country" (6). She is very fond of Tridib's younger brother Robi, who is well built and strong. She also forces her grandson, the narrator, to do physical exercises because she believes: "You can't build a strong country...without building a strong body" (8). A strong sense of nationalism makes Thamma critical of Ila. Thamma cannot tolerate that Ila in spite of her Indian origins should feel at home in London;

Ila has no right to live there, she said hoarsely. She doesn't belong there. It took those people a long time to build that country; hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed. Everyone who lived there has earned the right to be there with blood. That is what you have to achieve for India, don't you see? (78)

For people like Thamma, the nation is marked by a feeling of intimacy and a sense of integration. But, in the postcolonial era, individuals are widening their horizons and are crossing national frontiers. Today, nationalism is a boon if it promises the freedom to think and act freely, but becomes a bane when it imposes shackles.

Thamma's narrow nationalism makes her believe in the existence of physical borders. She believes that, while travelling from Calcutta to Dhaka, she will "be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane" (151). When her son mocks at the idea, she says:

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? ... And if there's no difference both sides will be the same... what was it all for then— partition and all the killing and everything— if there isn't something in between? (151)

Thamma's belief in clear-cut border lines results from her childhood experience. As a small girl she has witnessed the division of her ancestral home in Dhaka between her father and his brother Jethamoshai. The division is done to the closest degree.

When the wall was eventually built, they found that it had ploughed right through a couple of door-ways so that no one can get through them anymore...The brother's even partitioned their father's old nameplate. It was divided down the middle by a thin white line. (123)

This leaves an impression on the young girl's mind that partition has to be done neatly by drawing border lines. According to Rahul Sapra, Thamma's brand of nationalism is so "rigid that she shuts other people out", and defines the World as 'Us' against 'Them'. Thamma has drawn physical as well as psychological borders around herself, which do not allow her to be

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed E-Journal in English

Vol. I & Issue IV

a global citizen. She is one of those postcolonial individuals who live in the circumference of their own nation. The fact that her grand-niece Ila lives not in India but in England is enough to make the girl “a whore” or “a greedy little slut” (79). Belief in the solidity of national borders forces Thamma to go to Dhaka to bring her old uncle Jethamoshai to India, which, she feels, is his nation by right. Unfortunately, the trip proves fatal for her family when Tridib and Jethamoshai are killed by a violent mob.

Jethamoshai’s observations about nation, nationalism and freedom are quite antithetical to Thamma’s. His views of nationalism do not develop from any political formation of national borders; rather, it comes from his natural feeling. He feels that his birth in a specific country is enough to define his nationality. Through the character of Jethamoshai, Ghosh shows a different side of national identity. Political borders can easily be changed at the pleasure of politicians, but a person’s birthplace provides a lasting sense of belonging. Jethamoshai’s views are important reminders of these facts to people who live within the strict constraints of nationalism. However, Jethamoshai belongs to an older generation, brought up in an era before the redrawing of national borders, and his views are not accepted by the current generation. Jethamoshai during partition gives shelter to homeless refugees and tragically, in a violent incident dies along with his foster son, a refugee, Khalil, suggesting the ever-lasting relationship between human beings, be they Hindu or Muslim. The old man’s idea about the nation can also be contrasted with that of Ila. Her sense of a homeland does not arise from taking birth in a particular country; rather, it derives from the personal freedom that a place can give her. She does not like the weight of tradition which her native culture imposes. She does not like the moralizing attitude of her relatives. As a result she starts revolting against Indian traditions. She lives in the West, wears Western clothes and keeps her hair short.

Do you see now why I’ve chosen to live in London? Do you see? It’s only because I want to be free... Free of you...Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you. (88-89)

Being a young cosmopolitan, Ila does not take her sense of belonging from any territory or border but rather from the freedom to do what she likes. To achieve this freedom, she marries Nick Price, a Britisher. He is unfaithful to her, only causing her psychic and financial damage. The narrator suggests to her: “You must leave him, Ila” (188). But she cannot do so. On hearing the narrator’s suggestion, Ila laughs in her “familiar high-spirited laugh” and says, “I wouldn’t leave him if he moved a whole bloody massage parlor from Bangkok into the house. He knows that perfectly well; he knows I love him so much I could never leave him” (S.L.189). The novel suggests that her attachment to Nick is because of her attachment to western culture. It is not Nick with whom Ila wants to stay but his being a westerner which keeps her with him. She bears all the damage caused by Nick only to get that

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed E-Journal in English

Vol. I & Issue IV

freedom which the Western culture gives. Thus, Ila's desire for a home is completely crushed. She is separated from both the communities: Indian and British.

Ila's ideas about identity and freedom are in sharp contrast to those of the narrator. He believes in traditions and in certain boundaries which a national culture imposes on its citizens.

I thought of how much they all wanted to be free; I began to wonder whether I was that mad because I was happy to be bound: whether I was alone in knowing that I could not live without the clamour of the voices within me. (.89)

The narrator's awareness of nationalism lies in the security that a nation offers. Even as an adult, the narrator is unable to forget the 1964 riots between Hindus and Muslims which he had witnessed as a young boy. He is unable to understand why there is so much violence over borders, why;

"they had drawn the borders, believing in that pattern, in the enhancement of lines, hoping perhaps that once they had etched their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other...they had created not a separation but a yet-undiscovered irony—the irony that killed Tridib" (233).

The narrator does not seek external freedom, like Ila, but internal freedom: the freedom which every nation promises to its citizens. But he does not find this promise fulfilled. The riots he has once witnessed, as well as his beloved mentor's death, make him suspicious that such acts of violence can be repeated again.

Robi also craves psychological freedom. He wants to come out of the trauma of Tridib's death, which he witnessed in Dhaka. Fifteen years after the incident, in London with Ila and the narrator, Robi shares his memories of it and says:

I've never been able to rid myself of that dream... When I was a child I used to pray that it would go away... But it wouldn't go: it stayed. I used to think: 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. (246)

Robi has witnessed the gruesome scene of his brother's death. He thinks that he will never be able to free himself of its memories. After sharing this, a fearful and helpless Robi, the narrator and Ila stand "a long time... on the steps of that derelict Church in Clapham, three children of a free state together clinging." (S.L.247)

Robi also articulates his understanding of freedom and nationhood:

Free...You know, if you look at the pictures on the front pages of the newspapers at home now, all those pictures of dead people in Assam, the north east, Punjab, Sri Lanka, Tripura—people shot by terrorists and separatists and the army and the police, you'll find somewhere behind it all that single word:

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed E-Journal in English

Vol. I & Issue IV

everyone's doing it to be free...And then I think to myself, why don't they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every little space a new name? What would it change? It's a mirage; the whole thing is a mirage. How can anyone divide a memory? (246-247)

Robi believes that nations and borders are mere illusions, shadow lines, which promise to give freedom and security but are unable to do so. He feels that if freedom came out of violence then surely Tridib's death would have set him free. Robi wants to be free from the haunting memories of Tridib's death. He wants to be secure of the lives of his dear ones. Thus, he becomes a spokesman of the postcolonial generation, voicing the fear that has captured the present day youth.

Though Robi cannot deny the violent socio-political happenings in his country, he is a follower of its cultural traditions. He cannot tolerate his culture being tainted by his own niece Ila, who is British in her habits. When Ila proposes to dance with a stranger, he feels annoyed, pulls her back, pushes the man away and says to her:

You ought to know that girls don't behave like that here...you can do what you like in England...But here there are certain things to do. That's our culture; that's how we live. (S.L.88)

Thus, through the character of Robi, Ghosh presents the anguished condition of the postcolonial generation which, after gaining freedom from colonial rule, lives under the burden of shadow lines. This generation also experiences conflict between Western and Indian cultural elements, often seen as a clash between tradition and modernity.

May Price is also a seeker of psychological freedom. Her notion of identity is not restrictive but transnational. It is not only Tridib's love which brings her to India but also keenness to see the world. Lying on the bed in a hotel room in India, she thinks about her reasons for being there: "there wasn't a reason, no good reason at all that she could think of, except curiosity—curiosity about what lay beyond West Hampstead" (166). During her visit, Tridib takes her to show the Victoria Memorial in Calcutta. Seeing the statue, May turns pale. She turns her head away and closes her eyes. On being asked why by Tridib, she says: "Let's go, please, I can't bear it... It shouldn't be here... It's an act of violence, It's obscene" (170). May is a British woman, a citizen of a country which colonized India in the past, but she cannot tolerate the reminders of colonization still present in India. Her sense of self is broad as well as humane. She collects money in England "For Famine relief...In Africa mainly" (S.L.162). She fasts on Saturdays and sleeps on the floor because she feels that the majority of people in the world live without basic comforts like food and beds. She puts a wounded dog out of its misery in Calcutta and attempts to save Jethamoshai from the violent mob in Dhaka. Thus, May's notion of identity is intercontinental and compassionate. She does not

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed E-Journal in English

Vol. I & Issue IV

believe in defining herself by the strict parameters of British nationality; rather, she sees the whole globe as one.

Tridib's notion of nationalism is also transnational. In the novel, he signifies a character that transcends both race and class. He broadens the imaginative outlook of the narrator. In Calcutta, once, the whole of the Chaudhri family is assembled and there is a very lively discussion about Colombo, where Ila's father is a diplomat in the Indian foreign service. Tridib takes the narrator aside and makes him imagine what Colombo really looks like: "Did you notice that Ila's house had a sloping roof...imagine what it would be to live under the sloping roof— no place to fly kites, nowhere to hide when one wanted to sulk, nowhere to shout across to one's friends" (29). Tridib's wide imagination makes him surpass all borders and spaces. In a letter to May, he writes that he wants to meet her "in a place without a past, without history, free, really free, two people coming together with the utter freedom of strangers" (144). Through a union with May, he wants to wipe out the borderlines that divide people. Tridib is not a person who believes in criticizing the legacy of colonialism; rather, he believes in transcending all such boundaries. Tridib's death in a violent mob attack in Dhaka also symbolizes his global identity.

Thus, *The Shadow Lines* presents a study of nationalism in the colonial as well as the postcolonial era from various points of view. Each character stands for his or her accepted wisdom, disrupting the traditional structure of nationality. Through these conflicting ideas Ghosh seems to suggest that the notions of nationalism can be very difficult to define.

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