

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2018.2.6.54>

## **Nation as Identity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* and *The Shadow Lines***

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### **Abstract**

Of the contemporary Indian writers of novels in English, Amitav Ghosh happens to be extremely fascinating with his distinctive originality and flair for experimentation. Indeed as a novelist Amitav Ghosh defies categorization because in each new novel he has shifted his perspective and in the process has moved from one genre to another, exploring diverse subjects and forms such as cultural history, science, travel and reportage. In his novels Amitav Ghosh explores the ideas of nationhood and Diasporas, 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* is simultaneously about each character's personal identity and probably represents Ghosh's most direct confrontation with nationalism and national identity. Both in Political Science and Geography there is a specific definition of a country or a state. The work '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 paper sets out to contextualize 'nation', through a close reading of this novel.

**Keywords-** *Nationalism, Modernism, Identity, Culture, Demography*

### **Introduction**

The conceptualization of terms like nation-making, nationalism, nationality and their bearing on identity seem to be in flux rather than fixed, they are processes rather than finished products. This is obvious, as cultural or sociological paradigms are dynamic and unstable; they change, shift and rearrange themselves as a result of multiple factors like politics, religion and language. In the face of

such development, against the backdrop of a series of divergent factors mentioned above that continuously change the social milieu, it becomes increasingly difficult to think of the 'nation' in fixed ways. The critique of the nation then, of necessity, must move along the working through process of revisions and redefinitions. However, it is helpful to look at the issue from a cultural perspective, for the novel clearly shows that cultural formations are the sites within which one's nationality or individual identity may be constructed.

The present paper attempts to examine his portrayal of diasporic situations and the impacts of the forces of globalization in *The Circle of Reason* and *The Shadow Lines*, the writer's first two novels, for it seems that national boundaries and diasporic thoughts have assumed a central importance in the constructions of these novels.

Migration and dislocation, indubitably, are strikingly significant phenomena of the present time. They truly and effectively depict the postcolonial society as well as people's post-modern predicament. In his essay, "the Diaspora in Indian Culture", Amitav Ghosh observes, "the modern Indian diaspora- the huge migration from the subcontinent that began in the mid-nineteenth century- is not merely one of the most important demographic dislocations of modern times: it now represents important force in world-culture".

As a matter of fact, Ghosh's personal life itself has been a fascinating story of shifting locations- crossing boundaries. He was born in Calcutta (West Bengal), and grew up in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Iran and several other parts of India. In pursuit of his higher education and research objectives, he travelled down to Egypt and England. In addition, Ghosh has worked at several leading universities in the United States of America. But then, this reference to the facts of the writer's personal life by no means intends to suggest that his novels are autobiographical. Actually, it tends to imply that the experience of the writer's immigrant background has perhaps gone into shaping his diasporic thoughts, sensibility, art and vision. To reiterate, Amitav Ghosh's novels are woven around diasporic discourse. Displacement, relocation, transition, shifting, journeys, alienation and migration are found pivotal to his narrative world and do inform significantly the other aspects of their plots. Robert Dixon as such appears right when he maintains,

Ghosh's writing reflects the recent concern of anthropologists with the porosity of cultural boundaries.

Like many of his contemporaries, Amitav Ghosh perhaps believes that no culture is self-contained. Nor can any culture exist in isolation. His stories as such move over countries and continents. The characters go beyond their national boundaries and incidents extend across several locations. *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, *The Calcutta Chromosome* and *The Glass Palace*- All represent life in crisscross cultural spaces. Both *The Circle of Reason* and *The Shadow Lines* start

and end with migrations. As for *The Circle of Reason*, the novel may be described as a story of flights and adventures of its chief protagonist- Alu. Balaram Bose, Alu's foster father, is obsessed with phrenology, scientific reasons, western ideas and books of Louis Pastur. In his strong belief and exciting campaign to clean his settlement of dirt and squalor, diseases and ignorance, myth and superstition, he makes use of drums of Carbollic acid and thus destroys the whole village. Bhudeo Roy too, sets afire Rakhal's explosive following his plan to take revenge on Balaram. In this process of purification and retaliation, Balaram, Toru Devi, Maya and Rakhal all are burnt to death and finally there is left heaps of ashes and debris. Alu then is charged with sedition and extremism by the police. To evade police, subsequent arrest and punishment Alu runs away from Lalpukur to Calcutta, from Calcutta to Kerala, from Kerala to the imaginary gulf-country al-Ghazira and from al-Ghazira finally to Algeria through Alexandria, Egypt, Lisbon, Tunis and El Oued. Moreover, on his voyage, the hero encounters so many diasporic men and women, events and situations. A few of them influence his fortune in a significant way as well.

This outline truly exhibits how the narrative design of *The Circle of Reason* is made of changing locations and settings as the hero goes on travelling across borders of various regions. He actually lives in many places. By this, the novelist perhaps intends to suggest that constant movement is a reality of human life and crossing borders is a kind of primordial human desire for quest and exploration. Alu's journey across borders is full of changes and eventful experiences. It is life-like indeed. The implication is that it is all futile to draw lines of demarcation between two cultures or two national identities or peoples. *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh's next novel (after *The Circle of Reason*) appears an extended and emphatic representation of the same concern in a new way. It betrays the fact that borderlines between two societies and cultures are insubstantial. Lalpukur, the locale in the first part of *The Circle of Reason*, is a village in West Bengal. It is very close to Bangladesh border. The place itself is a product of diaspora. It is a settlement of refugees from Bangladesh:

Most of the people of Lalpukur belonged originally to the remote district of Noakhali, in the far east of Bengal, close to Burma. They had immigrated to Indian in a slow, steadily trickle in the year after East Bengal became East Pakistan.

Besides, Ghosh' fictional world shows his deep interest in and preoccupation with national history. References to past events as well as conditions appear a marked feature in him. This might be a means of commenting on the bygone times, a technique of assessing comparatively the contemporary situations or a metaphor for the writer's philosophy. The important point, nevertheless, is that the tradition of diaspora is rooted to human history and culture. Dixon notes:

For Ghosh even societies that appear to be static and traditional are always already diasporic.

Lalpukur too has such a history. Long before the world had sniffed genocide in Bangladesh, Lalpukur began to swell. It grew and grew. First, it was brothers with burnt backs and balls cut off at the roots. Then it was cousins and cousins of cousins. Then it did not matter; borders dissolved under the weight of millions of people in panic-stricken flight from an army of animals. (Dixon)

The second part of the novel is set against the background of an oil town, al-Ghazira, the Middle East. The town is crowded with migrant labourers and foreign settlers from various parts of the world:

It was a merchant's paradise, right in the centre of the world, conceived and nourished by the flow of centuries of trade. Persians, Iraqis, Zanzibari Arabs, Omanis and Indians flattened upon it and grew rich...

Zindi al-Tiffaha, for instance, is an Egyptian prostitute and owns a house in The Seven head area. All sorts of migrant workers, refugees and traders live in her house. Jeevanbhai Patel presents yet another very interesting example of a real diasporic man. He is a Gujarati Hindu who comes from Durban in South Africa and finally settles in this oil town after a long course of continuous flight as his marriage was not acceptable to his parents. Prof. Samuel, Kulfi, Karthamma, Rakesh, Abu Fahl, Florid Mian, Hiji Fahmi and Mast Ram- are all settlers here. Not only in al-Ghazira but also in the small town of El Oued, Algeria, in Part Three, where Zindi and Alu, finally decide to migrate, with Kulfi and baby Boss, we see many emigrant Indians such as Mr. and Mrs. Verma, Dr. and Mrs. Mishra, and Miss Krishnaswamy. It is interesting to note that Jyoti Das, the Police Inspector, too tracks Alu all along India and the Gulf country and finally to the African country. *The Circle of Reason* can thus appropriately be described as a novel of migration. It weaves together the various strands of diasporic phenomena. In an interview with Sheela Reddy, Amitav Ghosh clearly said, "the whole system of nation-states is coming under increasing strain. The rich countries are essentially more and more a single unit: Borders don't really apply".

The fact that 'borders don't really apply' has been expressed emphatically and metaphorically by the image of weaving which recurs throughout the novel and appears integrated to the plot. In the beginning of the story we see how one day, after much deliberation, Balaram decides to make Alu, his nephew, a weaver. He takes Alu to Shombhu Debnath to learn the skill, technology and patterns of weaving. Weaving consists in joining and uniting separate threads. It doesn't allow any separation or division. Moreover, it depends basically on borrowing and lending across borders. Diaspora too, is involved with transcendences across regional borders. Justifying his decision of selecting Alu as an apprentice weaver, Balaram thinks of weaving, "It has created not separate worlds but one; for it has never permitted the division of the world. The loom recognizes no continents and no countries. It has tied the world together with its bloody ironies from the beginning of human time".

Weaving, thus does not have one single root or fixed borders. It is inclusive and all embracing. All through those centuries cloth, in its richness and variety, bound the Mediterranean to Asia, India to Africa, the Arab world to Europe in equal, bountiful trade.

This feature of inclusion and homogenization is reflected in the subtitles of the three sections in which the novel has been divided. The three parts of the novel are named- Satwa: Reason, Rajas: Passion and Tamas: Death. Satwa, Rajas and Tamas actually refer to the well-known Sankhya system of thought of the ancient Indian Philosophy. Adherents of the philosophy believe that the doctrine has its roots in the Upanisads and Kapila rishi is the father of the principle. According to this school of thought Satwa, Rajas, and Tamas are the three Gunas- the three constituent powers of Prakriti, the fundamental substance from which this world has evolved. For development, goodness and happiness these three Gunas have to be in the state of equilibrium. The predominance of one over the other produces disturbances in individuals and the world. The respective functions of Satwa, Rajas and Tamas are manifestation, activity and restraint. The three Gunas are never separate. They support each other and produce pleasure, pain and sloth respectively. The world as a matter of fact is composed of these elements. By referring to these three Gunas perhaps the novelist tends to suggest that across the geographical, economical and political boundaries as well as divergent cultures a world of global human culture can possibly be established.

As we see, *The Circle of Reason* relates globalization too- its condition, impact and failures. The portrayal of the crumbling of boundaries appears suggestive of a universal humanity and homogenized culture. It insists on a culture of accommodation and inclusion. The novel, nevertheless, depicts the bleak and grim realities of the global economy and migrancy as well. Balaram is obsessed with phrenology, carbolic acid and Louis Pasteur. It shows his enormous fascination with the western thoughts and scientific reasoning across borders. Nonetheless, all his efforts result in disastrous consequences. He loses every time.

Life of immigrant workers and diasporic traders at al-Ghazira (a global market place) depicts the realities of this international system (globalization) such as, economic inequalities, slavery, miseries, helplessness and exploitation. In the novel, most of the people are victims and sufferers and it is the desire to earn money, gain economic security and get rid of the miserable life at home that has driven both men and women from their homes. Alu is a victim of the meaningless war between his uncle Balaram and the dishonest landlord, Bhudev Roy. He is on the run because of them. Zindi is forced to cross the national border and take up prostitution as her business for living because she is tortured at home for not being able to produce any child. Her displacement is, thus caused by the patriarchal oppression, violence and the loss of home. Her thoughts and style of working too are formulated by her own conditions and the global theory of consumerism. She provides shelter and

opportunity to the oppressed, the deprived and the exploited women. There is no sense of morality or conscience involved in her business. Her trade is as good or bad as any other trade. Moreover, she knows the art and skill of marketing her product: "But I don't take them all. I take only good girls,." To her, prostitution is "work" and women are hard workers. She believes that sex-work and her "entrepreneurship" are legitimate. Zindi's thinking thus] presents prostitution as a productive labour. She tries to dignify her business as such. Evidently, her ideas are in conformity with the principles of global economy and western consumer capitalism.

Karthamma, another migrant worker, undergoes a pathetic and tortuous experience of pregnancy and delivery. Her story really presents an abject picture of how the forces of globalisation are operating in social life. She is not ready to deliver her child on board without signing the delivery form. She thinks that her child will be deprived of a lawful birth certificate and thus the right to get admission to a school and obtain a job in absence of the right form. Prof. Samuel describes to Alu, "She says that she knows that the child won't be given a house or a car or anything at all if she doesn't sign the forms. It'll be sent back to India, she says, and she would rather kill it than allow that to happen; kill it right now with a bottle while it's still in her womb".

Karthamma is enormously fearful of the identity, future and alienation of her unborn child. There is apprehension that if the child is born in the ship, it will not become al-Ghazira. It will then remain economically insecure. This acute feelings of economically insecure future as well as fear of national identity for emigrants are postmodern features. The situation becomes more pathetic as she does not want to go back to India. The example of Zindi, Karthamma and Kulfi clearly underline the consumer culture in the wake of globalized capitalism. All these women suffer exploitation as subproletarian female workers. Their stories show the plight of marginalized women in their own countries as well as across their countries. They exhibit the failures of globalization- the increasingly transnational world culture.

*The Shadow Lines* spans both time and space and paints a landscape of symbolism and realism. The concepts of distance and time are exclusively represented in both the physical borders that divide countries and the imaginary borders that divide human beings. From the image-conscious character of the grandmother to the riots that explode in the streets, Ghosh takes the reader on a fascinating journey of exploration, dissecting the characters of the story while simultaneously dissecting the human race. There are a good number of instances, which show a good fusion of language, culture and countries to bring home the point that the earth after all is like one country.

As for *The Shadow Lines*, in his essay "A Reading of the Shadow Lines", Prof. A.N. Kaul observes, "Crossing of frontiers-especially those of nationality, culture and language-has increased the world over, including India. Of this tendency *The Shadow Lines* is an extreme example".



True, *The Shadow Lines* depicts incidents, experiences, conflicts and people of two diasporic families that belong to three countries- India, Bangladesh and England. The lives of three generations are the subjects of exploration here. Throughout, the locations go on shifting, realistically and imaginatively, between Calcutta, Dhaka and London. It is important to note that all the incidents of crucial importance emanate from crossing national borders and the men and women undergo pleasures and pains as a result of this transition. Mr. Lionel Tresawsen leaves his home in north London and comes to Calcutta, after Malaysia, Fiji and Ceylone, establishes his business and finally settles into life here. He is a man who has travelled a large part of the globe. In Calcutta, Mr. Tresawsen becomes a friend to Datta-Chaudhuri, a high court judge. The friendship grows deep and transforms into an enduring relationship of blood between the two families. Tresawsen's grandson, Nick Price is married to Datta-Chaudhuri's granddaughter, Ila, and Datta-Chaudhuri's grandson, Tridib, gets married to May Price, Tresawsen's granddaughter. Thus, the two families of different cultures- of the East and the West- get united. The political and national frontiers construct no barrier.

The diasporic subject such as crossing boundaries, nationalism, freedom, and rootlessness have been brought up and described at several points in the story. Nevertheless, they get focused prominently in the perspectives and character of the narrator's grandmother, Thamma, and her journey to Dhaka- her ancestral homeland, where she goes to bring her Jethamoshai back to Calcutta. In fact, the grandmother has her own ideas on nationality and border lines. Ghosh has portrayed in her a common woman of conventional ideas and ideology. She has revolutionary patriotic fervor. She thinks that a nation is built on plenty of sacrifices and wars and blood of its people. She feels utterly confused to think that her own place of birth, education and forefathers has become a foreign land. she wonders how she can become an alien in her own home. Ila stands as a perfect foil to her as she does not feel rooted to one culture or confined to the borders of one nation, or to home for that matter. Once she even tells the narrator that she does not like his culture and wants to be "Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you". She really shows a major characteristic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century diasporic mind and behavior as she loves freedom. She has travelled abroad so constantly and extensively (her father is a diplomat at the U.N.) that new places and cultures do not excite her impervious mind. Quite contrary to this, the grandmother is a firm believer in the concept of nationality. The narrator notes:

All she wanted was a middle-class life in which, like the middle classes the world over, she would thrive believing in the unity of nationhood and territory, of self-respect and national power: that was all she wanted-a modern middle class life, a small thing that history had denied her in its fullness and for which she could never forgive it.

It seems that forced mainly by this outlook that one evening when she is lying in bed in hospital and the narrator tells her about Ila's tensed married life and racist treatment at school in London, where she was not defended by her philandering husband, she bursts out furiously. She does not accuse her husband for all those happenings but blames Ila for her choice of selecting a home outside her own country and decision of living in the Western culture. She says that Ila should not live in London as she is not culturally and nationally rooted there:

Ila has no right to life 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 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're a national because they have drawn their borders with blood.

But then, the grandmother's long faith in nationality, culture and borders get dashed to pieces when confronted with realities. Her family, it seems important to note here, lived in East Pakistan (Bangladesh) but came to Calcutta (India) after the partition of India. She was married to an engineer in Burma, lived there for about twelve years and did not visit her house in Dhaka. But when she decides to go to Dhaka after so many years, the prospect of crossing the national borderlines of India excites her wildly. The partition of India has not reduced her love for her birthplace. She wants to know from her son if "she will be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane"(151). She thinks that perhaps there are trenches, or soldiers or guns pointed at each other or barren strips of land- at the borders of the two nations. But when her son tells her that "she won't be able to see anything except clouds and perhaps, if you're lucky, some green fields", she is disappointed. A significant realization of her mistakes dawns on her.

My grandmother thought this over for a while, and then she said: 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 were it all for then-partition and all the killing and everything- if there isn't something in-between?

The grandmother's changed outlook gets reinforced and by her Jethamoshai in Dhaka when he out rightly refuses her proposal of going to Calcutta:

Once you start moving you never stop. That's what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: 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? No one will have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here.

All this shows how the novelist paints a global canvas here. The narrator's voice appears to be the author's voice and suggest that these issues of boundaries and national culture are illusory and flimsy. There cannot be any divisions of universal humanity. And if there is any dividing line, it is the invisible line of humanity. The concept of time in the story can be taken as a metaphor for the national borders. It seems to suggest that as there is no division or wall between past and present, the separating lines between nations also cannot stand. When the narrator hero discovers at last the realities of his cousin, Tridib's death, he realizes how wrong he was in his belief,

I was a child, and like all the children around me, I grew up believing in the truth of the precepts that were available to me: I believed in the reality of space; I believed that distance separates, that it a corporeal substance; I believed in the reality of nations and borders; I believed that across the borders existed another reality. The only relationship my vocabulary permitted between those separate realities was war or friendship.

"Ghosh's novels, in sum, depict some significant aspects of the contemporary life. Long before migrancy and globalization became household words, the writer attempted to explore their features and examine how they could shape our future. He can thus, be described as a predictive novelist who loves to travel between varied cultures to understand, in his own words, "individuals and their specific predicament". To the readers of our times, as such, the novel has become more engaging and enlightening.

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 are both vague and shadowy, no truth is every objective and no freedom unconditional. 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 reality in their own diverse way. 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.

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