

The ideology of “Vasudhev Kutumbakam” vs. Nationalism in the novel “The Shadow Lines” by Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh in his novel “The Shadow Lines” explores the ideas of nationhood and its involvement in social life of individual belonging to the same or different communities. The novel deals with the theme of partition and its consequences on individual lives. The theme of national identity vs individual identity is prevalent in the novel. It presents the prevailing uncertainty between narrow nationalism and the ideology of globalization in the pretext of a country where the ideals of “Vasudhev Kutumbakam” exist. The genocide and mass killing in the wave of nationalism and problems of immigrants are highlighted in the novel. The novel questions our identity as a nation and its acclaimed supremacy over our social and individual identity. And are we ready to lose our identity as an individual or our identity as a family for the sake of our nation? Or for the fear of being called an anti-national or a traitor to the motherland?

Amitav Ghosh has made an appreciable attempt to examine the loss of social identity leading to an identity crisis in his novel “The Shadow Lines”(1988). The novel narrated through the lines of nostalgia questions our identity as a nation or a nationalist.

Keywords:- Nationhood, Freedom, Geo-political boundaries, Social-identity, Post-colonialism, Contemporary.

The post-colonial era witnessed the rise of a feeling labelled “patriotism”, people now began to identify themselves as “Indians”. The people who were fragmented under the labels of Hindu- Muslim, Bengali- Punjabi were now standing in unison under the umbrella of a common nationality. The struggle to make India politically and economically independent not only led to the demise of British rule but also led to the awakening of literature as if a person was up from his deep coma that held him onto the grips of unconscious for uncountable years and was standing in front of the mirror frowning at his own reflection trying to reach for the person who looked at him from the other side of the mirror with curious eyes, eyes that were holding a million questions and lips that whispered without movement “who are you?” ... the words that echoed from his ears to his brain.

“Hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed.. they know they’re a nation because they’ve drawn their borders with blood... War is their religion. That’s what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood. This is what you have to achieve for India, Don’t you see?”(Pg. 86)

The Shadow Lines is a **sahitya akademi award** winning novel by the Indian writer **Amitav Ghosh**. The novel presents to us the story of Tha'mma's family through the memory lines of her grandson. Tha'mma is a nationalist in her approach and believes in the ideology of nationhood. She encountered the wave of nationalism during her college days and she is willing to contribute to India's independence to the extent of martyrdom. She recognizes India's freedom as her own individual freedom. Her dedication towards her belief is evident when she says she would have killed an English officer for the sake of her country's independence –

“ I would have been frightened, but I would have prayed for strength, and God-willing, yes, I would have killed him. It was for our freedom; I would have done anything to be free.”(Pg. 43)

Tha'mma, haunted by a dreadful past, is on a mission to reunite her long-lost family. She wants to rescue her uncle from Bangladesh. She desperately wants Jethamoshai to reunite with her and spend his remaining life in India which the narrator calls **“her invented country”**, in view of the increasing tension between India and Pakistan. She is very apprehensive when she says-

“I'm worried about him, poor old man, all by himself, abandoned in that country... imaging what it must be die in another country, abandoned and alone in your old age” (Pg. 151)

The novel presents a beautiful amalgamation of reality and imagination. The title “The Shadow Lines” not only refers to the physical boundaries between the countries but also the boundaries between actuality and artistry, the crisis of national identity and individual existence and as the pages of the book whirl by these shadowy lines began to blur and ultimately comes to nothing more than a few lines drawn on some atlas. The novel never pretends to tell a coherent story for most of the plot is woven out of memory stuff of its characters- the unnamed narrator, Tha'mma, Ila, and Tridib. The book presents the story of a family against the backdrop of historical and political events like the Swadeshi movement, partition of India and communal riots of 1963-64 in Dhaka and Calcutta.

The novel is centered around events depicting experiences and conflicts of people belonging to different generations and different ideologies. Realistically and inventively the novel is set against the backdrop of India and Bangladesh. ‘The Shadow Lines’ puts the readers in a situation of uncertainty and dilemma. It makes us question the concept of Nationalism .. who gave us this concept? As Rabindranath Tagore says in one of his essays-

“ The nations do not create, they merely produce and destroy. Organizations for production are necessary, even organizations for destruction maybe so. But when, actuated by greed and hatred, they crowd away into a corner the living man who creates, then the harmony is lost, and the people’s history runs at a break-neck speed towards some fatal catastrophe.”

Nationalism is an entirely foreign concept in our country, where our ancestral values cherished the idea of “Vasudhev Kutumbakam”. The ideology of this concept might have transpired from an entirely non- scientific philosophies, but our contemporary civil genetics have re-established how liberal, progressive and scientific it is. In the Era of globalization, which is yet another form of internationalism, where the distances across the globe are continuously decreasing, the relics of nationhood is questionable.

अयं निजः परो वेति गणना लघुचेतसाम् द्य

उदारचरितानां तु वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम् द्यद्य ॥ ;महोपनिषद्ए अध्याय ४ए श्लोक ७१द्द

**One is a relative, the other stranger,
say the small minded.
The entire world is a family,
live the magnanimous.**

**Be detached,
be magnanimous,
lift up your mind, enjoy
the fruit of Brahmanic freedom.**

—*Maha Upanishad*

If we look back, the entire ideology of nationalism is a product of British oppression. A person must be loyal to his roots. But when the oblivious past tells him -You don't belong and its better to retreat; how long will the Nationalism prevail?. The Shadow Lines presents to us a similar identical crisis where the narrator is caught in the grips of nostalgia, making futile attempts to justify bloodshed and terrorism, crippled in the grips of ethical

and unethical, morality and immorality, right and wrong; he tells his story. The story of a family standing at the two ends of a line, close enough to see each other, to hear each other but distant to understand each other. They have a similar surname, same blood rush in their arteries, but the governments say they are far as poles because of their duties as a citizen of different nations.

The novel narrates the story of a soul trying to trace those black dotted lines drawn on the globe, that separates different nations. Amitav Ghosh focusses on the trauma of individual lives caught in the changing world where new nations are formed and old identities have to be arbitrarily replaced by new notions of national identity causing cultural and physical displacements from old contexts to new ones.

In “A Reading of the Shadow Lines” Professor A.N. Kaul concluded “ crossing of frontiers especially nationality, culture and language has increased the world over, including India, of this tendency. The Shadow Lines is an extreme example...”(Pg. 299)

Power structures have always prevailed and demanded sovereignty over an individual’s life. These power holders draw boundaries and come up with the ideals of “nation, nationalism and patriotism” bringing about their own kinds of alienation and heartbreak. Ghosh, in his novels, makes an attempt to encapsulate the impotency and inefficacy of the political freedom which was supposed to herald the era of opulence and contentment. The writer blames that the people who are authoritarian in the name of their identity have crucified their social identity.

Ghosh in this novel portrays the misplaced sense of nationhood through the central character- Tha’mma. Tha’mma serves as a mouthpiece for the authoritative nationalist thinking, whose nationalist fervor has sharpened the sense of patriotism. She even extends her logic to justify the blood sacrifices of war and aligns patriotism by recalling the discourse of the formation of nation that defines it in geo-political terms through its boundaries that serve to exclude some while ensuring unity and prosperity to others labelled as its citizens. But how can one justify the mass killings and the genocide just because some of the power holders decide to mark up yet another boundary?

Independence from colonialism eventually caused the germination of the sown seeds of division, irrationality, intolerance and fear. Moreover, the existence of a nation is particularly defined in opposition to other nations, the writer examines the validity of this mythical concept of nationhood by narrating the story of a family divided in the name of nationality. He makes an attempt to contemplate the issues of exile and immigration. We cannot justify the discriminatory policies adopted by an institution on the basis of a birthplace. Picture a policy maker someday visits your home and draws a line and announces that thereafter it shall be called as two different countries, and the people belonging in the other room are your enemies. That’s shows how irrational the concept of partition is. Similarly partition creates and nurtures the feeling of humiliation and agony for the relations and relatives, compelled to migrate from their home or birthplace merely for the reasons based on the whims of political solution of the problems faced by the nation. Patriotism is a mirage in itself. It doesn’t make a difference how many nations exist in a continent or a sub-continent; if the problems and the conditions of the people remain same.

This is explained in the novel through the collapse of Tha’mma. When she confronts the reality of the shallow man-made borders, she is shocked. Borders to Tha’mma are an entirely physical concept. When she sees the border of India and Bangladesh, she is searching for “trenches”. As quoted by the narrator-

“The border was a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other, like it was in school atlas.” She muses “ But surely there is something (...) if there aren’t any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where is the difference them? What was it for then- partition and all the killing and everything- if there isn’t something in between?” (Pg.151)

The novel talks how the 'Freedom' can reflect different images upon different people. Some may relate it to the feeling of nationhood and patriotism like Tha’mma who views freedom entirely as liberation from the colonial oppression, whereas Ila relates the word freedom as a struggle for personal identity and individual freedom whereas Tridib has his own idea about the very same word. The novel questions the validation of freedom in the

contemporary world. The novel however emphasizes on the idea that one can never relate freedom to the process of creation of geographical boundaries.

Shadow lines reveals the fragility in the ideology of nationalism, as etched out in maps. The novel questions the sovereignty of a nation; a mythical concept over everything, and claims that the boundaries between nations are like shadow lines, that causes nothing but hatred and hostility out in the name of national sentiments. The novel is a critique for the so called 'nationalists' who not only have faith in borders but also are ready to protect them at the cost of their blood. The novel seriously questions the ideology of borders and the prejudices faced by the people due to these borders. As Jethamoshai quotes -

“I don’t believe in this India- shindia. It’s all very well; you are going away now, but suppose when you set there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to ? No one will ever have you anywhere...”(Pg. 273)

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