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NARRATING THE NATION IN AMITAV GHOSH'S THE SHADOW LINES

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ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines unfolds a captivating narrative exploring the intricate relationship between borders, identity, and freedom. It displays the profound impact of political boundaries and historical events on personal identities and human lives. This paper sheds light on national identity, the pursuit of freedom, and the cultural transformations that resulted from India's partition and the rise of East Pakistan through Tha'mma, one of the central characters through the novel's narrative structure and character development, the profound impact of borders on individual and collective experience is explored. Tha'mma's story is examined to explore how borders influence one's sense of place, culture, and identity as she transitions from her family home in Dhaka to Calcutta. It illustrates how borders and boundaries can redefine one's sense of belonging by looking at Tha'mma's adaptation to her new surroundings. By emphasizing how geopolitical events can cause individuals to become foreigners in their home countries, The Shadow Lines offers profound insights into the essence of freedom, identity, and the lasting impact of borders on human experience as they relate to personal and familial life after these changes. Through the intricate narratives of Tha'mma, Ila, Jethamoshai, and other characters, the novel lays bare the intricate relationship between personal and national identities. The paper offers a new perspective regarding the transformative legacy of history and politics on individual lives, emphasizing that borders are as much about the mind as they are about the land, giving an in-depth understanding of how boundaries affect perceptions of self and home.

Keywords: Nation, Nationalism, Identity, Culture, Boundaries, etc

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1. INTRODUCTION

In post-colonial literature, the concept of a nation is multifaceted, encompassing geographical, political, economic, and cultural dimensions. Nations play an important role in shaping collective memory and identities after colonialism, serving as symbols of resistance and cultural revival, challenging the colonial portrayal of lands as primitive. Territoriality is fundamental to nation-building, with borders and geography being integral. Ernest Renan's perspective views nations as social constructs rather than natural entities, highlighting their dynamic and malleable nature. In the English language, nation has evolved with the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, becoming politically inclusive and broadening to encompass cultural and historical elements.

Renan's insights emphasize that modern nations amalgamate diverse populations through factors like shared cultural norms, languages, religions, and collective will, transcending racial or ethnic divisions. Religion and language play vital

roles, challenging the idea of homogeneity. The myth of nationhood, masked by ideology, perpetuates nationalism. In that concept, we get an idea about the nation. He says:

"A nation is a soul, a spiritual principal... It proposes a past; it is summarized, however, in the present by a tangible fact, namely, consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life. A nation's existence is... a daily plebiscite, just as an individual's existence is a perpetual affirmation of life." (8)

Ernest Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism* investigates nation formation, emphasizing industrialization and shared culture, especially language, as key elements in forging national identities. Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Communities" views nations as imagined political communities shaped by shared languages and print capitalism, allowing diverse people to identify as one. Gandhi and Tagore share concerns about Westernization's impact on Indian society, with the Revolt of 1857 as a response. Gandhi emphasizes the importance of pilgrimage sites and traveling acharyas in promoting human relationships and shared consciousness. He discusses how religion, language, and nation are intertwined and argues that all religions should share similar moral principles to ease religious conflict. In Gandhi's eyes, "It is not the nationalism that is evil, it is the narrowness, selfishness, exclusiveness which is the bane of modern nations which is evil" (Future of India 721). In *Hind Swaraj,* he refutes the notion that India's nationhood was based on inclusivity and that the country was formed primarily due to British rule. In the end, a country ought to be prepared to give its life to ensure the welfare of all people. Gandhi says:

"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)

Tagore in his *Nationalism* discusses the influence of Europe on Eastern Civilizations, particularly, India. In traditional society, the public and the rulers remain apart. Villages are self-contained with their administration and self-government. Tagore believes:

"The difference between the two is same as the difference between the handloom and the power loom. While in the products of handloom the magic of man's living fingers finds its expression, and its hum harmonizes with the music of life, the power loom is relentlessly lifeless and accurate and monotonous in its production." (43)

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of an imagined society sees nations as cultural constructs supporting political power. Gandhi emphasizes the need for common moral values to mitigate religious conflicts and cautions against the perils of greed. The concepts of space and time in the modern nation, along with the rise of the nation as a narrative form, are reflected in the narrative culture of the realist novel. But, says Bhabha, to "encounter the nation as it is written displays a temporary of culture and social consciousness more in tune with the partial, over-determined process by which the textual meaning is produced through the articulation of difference in language; more in keeping with the problem of closure which plays enigmatically in the discourse of the sign" (2).

By applying the insights from thinkers like Renan, Gellner, Anderson, Gandhi, Tagore, and Bhabha, this research paper investigates into specific excerpts from the novel to illuminate Ghosh's nuanced portrayal of nation, identity, and boundaries. These examples underscore how theoretical constructs of nationhood resonate in the lived experiences of Ghosh's characters, creating a dialogue between abstract ideas and their narrative representations. This integration highlights the dynamic interplay between the concept of the nation and the characters' personal and collective journeys, offering a deeper understanding of the fluidity and complexity of nationalism as depicted in the novel.

Amitav Ghosh's most popular novel *The Shadow Lines* explores the fluidity of nation-making, where nationality and nationalism are ongoing processes rather than fixed entities. In *The Shadow Lines*, the novelist puts forth the concepts of nation, nationhood, and nationalism, exploring how the relationships between individuals whether from the same or different communities sometimes cross and transcend the boundaries set by political borders. This interaction challenges nationalism, national identity, and the characters' sense of self. Terms like nation-making, nationalism, and nationality are portrayed as fluid and evolving, rather than fixed, highlighting their dynamic and process-oriented nature. A key theme in Ghosh's work is his commitment to global humanism, confronting the realization that multiculturalism cannot be neatly defined within geopolitical confines. Robert Dixon comments in his essay *Travelling in the West: The Writings of Amitav Ghosh* that "The cultural space that Ghosh re-situates is a borderless region with its hybrid languages and practices which circulate without national or religious boundaries" (4).

Tha'mma was born and raised in a joint family in Jindabahar, Dhaka, before the Partition of India. It was the time when the struggle for freedom from the Britishers was at its peak. She was a stubborn and strong-willed character. She lived in a joint family with her grandparents, parents, her father's elder brother Jethamoshai, and his family, which included three cousins of her age, along with a couple of spinster aunts. Their family was led by her grandfather, who was an

advocate who died when she was six years old. After the death of her grandfather, Jethamoshai tried to lead the family by taking the place of his father but failed, which resulted in successive quarrels and at last partition of the house. Both the siblings, Tha'mma's father and uncle Jethamoshai, were advocates so they insisted on their rights with the minutest details. At last, they decided to separate the house by installing a wooden partition wall with so much precision that they eventually built the wooden wall through the doorways, although that allowed no one to go through them anymore. The wooden partition went through the middle of her grandfather's nameplate separating it into two parts. Not only this, but the wooden partition also split a lavatory, dividing an old commode in half. This was the first time Tha'mma witnessed the partition, a physical boundary drawn through the middle of their house, which they were forbidden to cross under any circumstances. She analyzed how a boundary could affect the usual life inside the house. She witnessed the entire freedom struggle, which ultimately led to the formation of new boundaries, this time dividing different regions of the country. Her sense of freedom and nationhood was sharpened when she felt the tremors of British imperialism firsthand. This experience clarified and strengthened her understanding of nationalism and nationhood.

In the 1920s, when Tha'mma and her sister Mayadebi were in college, one day, a group of policemen entered the classroom due to a terrorist movement in Bengal, where secret societies were attempting to assassinate British officials. One officer singled out a quiet boy seated at the last desk. The boy hadn't panicked at all. The boy was planning to assassinate an English magistrate secretly and the boy was subsequently sent to prison. After that incident, Tha'mma would often dream about that boy, captivated by the terrorist movements. She longed to join them but didn't know how. She wished she could have somehow helped the boy by any means, maybe by making him aware, or by standing beside him in Khulna, holding a pistol in her hands, waiting to confront the English Magistrate herself. She told the narrator:

"If only she had known, if only she had been working with him, she would have warned him somehow, she would have saved him, she would have gone to Khulna with him too, and stood at his side, with a pistol in her hands, waiting for that English magistrate …" (43)

When she was asked by the narrator if she was serious about killing the English Magistrate herself, she told him, she would have killed him although she would be afraid, she would have done the same for her freedom, freedom from British imperialism. Narrator asked Tha'mma:

"… Do you really mean, Tha'mma, I said, that you would have killed him? She put her hands on my shoulders and, holding me in front of her, looked directly at me, her eyes steady, forthright, unwavering. I would have been frightened, she said. 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." (43)

Tha'mma and Mayadebi, though both sisters born and raised in the same house, followed very different destinies. Mayadevi got married to a rich diplomat whereas Tha'mma to an engineer in railway, who got different postings in neighbouring countries. They went to different places before eventually settling in Calcutta after the untimely death of Tha'mma's husband from pneumonia in 1935. She was only thirty-two years of age with the responsibilities of a ten-year-old son when he died without any savings. She had never worked in her life, but fortunately, she held a bachelor's degree in history from Dhaka University. A railway official, who was a friend of her husband, helped her secure a job at a school in Calcutta. She wasn't able to visit her parent's home in Dhaka after that because she had no time and in 1947, after the Partition of India and the creation of East Pakistan, there was no question of returning. This Job helped her lead her family. All this made her a strong, strict, and dominant member of her family. Tha'mma never allowed the narrator's mother to listen to the radio more than once a week. She never permitted the narrator to play with chessboards or cards. The only game she allowed him to play was Ludo, and only when he was ill. However, she encouraged him to play cricket and even insisted he go to the park by the lake, whether he wanted to or not, because both cricket and running involved physical exercise. Tha'mma was always aware of the benefits of physical exercise because that would make a strong body. Tha'mma always says while pushing him out of the house, "You can't build a strong country, she would say, pushing me out of the house, without building a strong body (9)." It shows her concern about nation-making along with her struggling middle-class life.

Tha'mma's sister, Mayadebi got married to a rich family. Her husband Saheb was a diplomat, whose father was a Justice named Chandrashekhar Dutta Chaudhary. Saheb's father had a foreign friend Lionel Treswasen from London. They met when Treswasen was trying to set up a Homeopathic hospital in Calcutta. Treswasen had two children Alan and Mrs. Price. Mrs. Price got married to Mr. Snipe. Mrs. Snipe lived with her husband and two children, Nick and May, at 44 Lymington Road, London. Both families continued their friendship even after the death of Treswasen. Mayadebi's granddaughter was pursuing her graduation in history from London, where she stayed with the family of Mrs Price. She had likings for Mrs. Price's son, Nick Price, whom she got married later. Once Ila was beaten by some college students,

and a policeman took her home. When asked Ila didn't tell anyone about the incident at the school. She expected Nick to stand by her side and save her but Nick always ignored her at the college because he was always afraid of his friends who would bully him if they saw him with an Indian girl. When the Narrator told this entire incident to Tha'mma, she did not blame Nick for not supporting Ila rather she blamed Ila, her mother, and her grandmother, for sending Ila to a country where she didn't belong because she didn't participate in any struggle in the making of that country. After listening to the narrator, she remarks:

"I don't blame the boy. It was Ila's fault. It was her own fault, and Maya's fault and the fault of that half-witted mother of hers. It was bound to happen: anyone can see that. She has no right to be there. She doesn't belong there…Ila has no right to live there, she said. 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 nation because they've drawn their borders with blood. Hasn't Maya told you how regimental flags hang in all their cathedrals and how all their churches are lined with memorials to men who died in wars, all around the world? 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?" (85)

The narrator idealized his maternal uncle, Tridib, and he shared everything with him too. For Tridib, Tha'mma was just a regular middle-class woman who wanted a normal, comfortable life like many people all over the world. She wanted to believe in the idea of her country, take pride in her culture, and have a decent life like a typical middle-class person. She simply wanted a middle-class life that would allow her to believe in the power of nationhood. However, history prevented her from fully experiencing this kind of life. When the narrator asks about Tha'mma, Tridib replies:

"She was only a modern middle-class woman – though not wholly, for she would not permit herself the self-deceptions that make up the fantasy world of that kind of person. 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 middleclass life, a small thing, that history had denied her in its fullness and for which she could never forgive it." (86

In Calcutta, during the summer vacation, Ila, the narrator, and Robi make a plan to visit a local bar. Ila was in full mood of dancing and enjoying. When she asked the narrator to dance, he declined, feeling too shy. Then she moved to Robi, he also rejected her idea of dancing there. Ila decided to dance at any cost, so she approached a thin businessman. When the businessman agreed to dance, Robi stood up, grabbed Ila by her blouse, and pushed the businessman back. Then, with a swift motion, he opened his palm and pressed it firmly into the centre of the man's chest, using such force that the man staggered back for about five feet. Then, they came outside, and Ila got a taxi and after getting in she shouted:

"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 what? I said. Free of you! she shouted back. Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you." (98)

After reaching home the narrator told the whole incident to Tha'mma. He realized he shouldn't have shared the incident with her, as she didn't value the kind of freedom that could be bought with a plane ticket. For Ila, freedom was something she could find in London simply by taking a flight. She would be in a different country, one with distinct boundaries and cultures, where she could do whatever, she pleased. Tha'mma spits, dismissing the idea that Ila could live freely like a whore in England, insisting that this isn't true freedom. For Tha'mma, freedom is earned through war and bloodshed, when a line is drawn in the sand, as it was during the Partition. It's not something that can be purchased with a plane ticket. This shows the different opinions of Tha'mma and Ila about freedom:

"It's not freedom she wants, said my grandmother, her bloodshot eyes glowing in the hollows of her withered face. She wants to be left alone to do what she pleases; that's all that any whore would want. She'll find it easily enough over there; that's what those places have to offer. But that is not what it means to be free." (98)

Later, the narrator realizes "How much they all wanted to be free; how they went mad wanting their freedom (98)." When Ila and the narrator met at her residence, she suggested he wear good branded clothes, but the narrator explained that he couldn't afford them on his fellowship. In response, Ila took him to Brick Lane to buy new clothes, where Indian and Bangladeshi shopkeepers ran the stores. Upon arrival, the narrator was surprised, as he had expected to see red brick houses lining a narrow street. Instead, the street resembled Bengal, as if it had been transplanted directly into the heart of London. There were Bengali neon signs, Bengali film magazines, and Hindi film advertisements, and people were communicating in Bengali. Different countries are formed by making their boundaries and these boundaries are a result of struggle and war. Borders had been drawn with their blood, but here, on Brick Lane, two cultures from different

countries coexisted without any borders or physical boundaries. The question arises whether the border separates nations or cultures. In the Brick Lane, two different cultures coexist without any physical border.

Tha'mma retired in 1962 from the school after serving as a headmistress when the narrator was ten years old. The school staged a farewell ceremony on Tha'mma's last day, which was attended by the narrator and his parents. The school prepared a special meal for them after the ceremony. As a headmistress, Tha'mma taught every girl who chose Home Science to cook a dish from a different part of the country, so they could learn about the country's diversity. This shows Tha'mma's dedication to her nation. Everyone was surprised when the girls came inside one by one with their unique dishes because Tha'mma not only remembered the name of each girl but also the dish prepared by each of them. The narrator remembered this incident as:

"When she was headmistress, my grandmother had decided once that every girl who opted for home science ought to be taught how to cook at least one dish that was a specialty of some part of the country other than her own. It would be a good way, she thought, of teaching them about the diversity and vastness of the country. As a farewell surprise, the home science department had arranged for us to sample the results of my grandmother's initiative." (128)

After her retirement, Tha'mma would walk near the lakeside where she found a lady who knew the residence of Jethamoshai's son in Calcutta itself. She learned that his cousin had passed away, but their family had remained in Calcutta when she inquired. So Tha'mma planned to visit them on Sunday. During their visit, they came to know that Jethamoshai was bedridden in Dhaka and had lost his senses to remember anything. He was being cared for and stayed with a Muslim family. She also adds:

"The whole house had been occupied by Muslim refugees from India – mainly people who had gone across from Bihar and U.P. My grandmother gasped in shock. Our house? she said. You mean our house has been occupied by refugees? Yes, said our relative, smiling benignly. That's what I said. The house was empty after Partition, everyone had left but my father-in-law, and he didn't even try to keep the refugees out. What could he have done anyway? As soon as he got to Dhaka my husband realised that he wouldn't be able to reclaim that house – no Pakistani court was going to evict those refugees." (149)

Before India and Pakistan's separation, it was their home in their own country but after the partition, Jethamoshai was identified as a foreigner in his land. He wasn't residing in his own house in his own country. His identity shifted from a local person who took birth here to a person who was not safe here anymore because of his religion. Had he been a Muslim, he would have been safe in the same country but being a Hindu, he would have been attacked in a Muslim-majority country. All the Muslim refugees who crossed the borders at the time of separation were respected residents in East Pakistan but Jethamoshai in his own country was no more a resident as he was before. His identity was completely changed after the partition, built by the new boundary. Even though he was living in the same home on the same property, the restrictions caused him to change who he was. During their correspondence, Tha'mma learned that Jethamoshai shared the same residence based on the address on the postcard. While coming back to their house Tha'mma said, "Poor old man, my grandmother said, her voice trembling. Imagine what it must be like to die in another country, abandoned and alone in your old age" (149). Here, Tha'mma revealed that her birthplace was in another country across the border, and the identity changed not only for Jethamoshai but also for Dhaka, where they were brought up. But now it was not part of their own country as its identity changed to a foreign land after the partition. So, not only personal identities but national identities also changed. Tha'mma again said:

"I'm worried about him: poor old man, all by himself, abandoned in that country, surrounded by …There's only one worthwhile thing left for me to do in my life now, she said. And that is to bring the old man home … And her eyes grew misty at the thought of rescuing her uncle from his enemies and bringing him back where he belonged, to her invented country." (151)

To get her uncle back to Calcutta, Tha'mma decided to travel to Dhaka. She questioned the narrator's father If she could see the boundary between East Pakistan and India from the plane. The narrator's father laughed at her, which puzzled her as there was nothing- no soldiers, no trenches, no barren land- to separate the two countries. She wondered after giving it some thought. If there was no obvious border, she questioned why the Partition had been made. The narrator remembers this incident as:

"For instance, one evening when we were sitting out in the garden she wanted to know whether she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane. When my father laughed and said, why, did she really think the border was a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other, like it was in a school atlas, she was not so much offended as puzzled. No, that wasn't what I meant, she said. Of course not. 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? 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 was it all for then – Partition and all the killing and everything – if there isn't something in between?" (166-67)

She grew up with a dividing wall built through the middle of her house. In her experience, borders and walls were real, tangible, and visible things, so she was confused that East Pakistan and India did not have a common border. After realizing her confusion, the narrator's father said:

"The border isn't on the frontier: it's right inside the airport. You'll see. You'll cross it when you have to fill in all those disembarkation cards and things…My grandmother shifted nervously in her chair. What forms? she said. What do they want to know about on those forms? My father scratched his forehead. Let me see, he said. They want your nationality, your date of birth, place of birth, that kind of thing… It was not till many years later that I realised it had suddenly occurred to her then that she would have to fill in 'Dhaka' as her place of birth on that form… she had not been able quite to understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality." (168)

Tha'mma discovered she was born in Dhaka, which is no longer part of India when she was required to fill out her nationality and place of birth on the disembarkation cards at the airport. At this moment, Tha'mma also realized that the Partition of India affected her sense of identity more than she previously realized. She identified as an Indian and Hindu woman, but now, she realized that because of the borders, she wasn't technically born in India- she was from the Muslim-majority country of East Pakistan.

The narrator's father teased Tha'mma about how she used to travel in and out of Burma easily, and she retorted that she could "come home to Dhaka" (168) whenever she wanted. The narrator saw that his grandma was unable to distinguish between coming and going. The confusion wasn't Tha'mma's fault, as language itself assumes a set point from which to come or go, and Tha'mma's journey to Dhaka was one to try to find that fixed point. The narrator saw that Tha'mma could not, at this point, "come" (168) to Dhaka. She could only ever go to Dhaka, as her current home was in Calcutta. However, this slip of language alludes to the power of stories and how people describe themselves and their homes.

Saheb, Mayadebi, and Robi were already in East Pakistan as Saheb was appointed in Dhanmundi near Dhaka. The first thing Tha'mma asked Mayadebi after reaching was, "Where's Dhaka?" (213) Dhaka was not the same as she grew up in her childhood. When Tha'mma claims that she was not in Dhaka, Tridib pointed out that she was a foreigner now in Dhaka same as May, who was a resident of England. The Partition of India altered Tha'mma's identity as an Indian and Hindu woman. Tridib supports his argument when he says:

"But you are a foreigner now, you're as foreign here as May – much more than May, for look at her, she doesn't even need a visa to come here. At that, my grandmother gave May a long wondering look and said: Yes, I really am a foreigner here – as foreign as May in India or Tagore in Argentina. Then she caught another glimpse of the house and shook her head and said: But whatever you may say, this isn't Dhaka." (215)

At last, when they reached their residence to bring back Jethmoshai with them to Calcutta, Jethmoshai didn't remember them. He denied coming back with them because he felt he was at his home where he took birth and he would like to die at his birthplace too. Tha'mma, Mayadebi, and everyone asked him to leave as riots were going to break anytime and it was not safe there anymore, Jethamoshai said:

"I understand very well, the old man muttered. I know everything, I understand everything. 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? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here." (237)

In this way, *The Shadow Lines* illustrates the historical events that redefined nations and identities in the Indian subcontinent. Therefore, certain border lines appear to be residuals of colonialism., whose "lines drawn in sands till haunt Third World geographies" (Shohat 99). As a result of these changes, the novel also provides a provocative understanding of the nature of identity, freedom, and the long-lasting effects of borders on human experience. Through its characters like Tha'mma, Ila, and others, the narrative uncovers the complex relationship between national and personal identities, offering an insight into the lasting effects of history and politics on individuals. *The Shadow Lines* highlights how borders shape our sense of self and belonging, emphasizing that boundaries influence not only the physical world but also the mental impact.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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