



## **Discovering the Yearning of Nationhood in Amitav Ghosh's Novel *The Shadow Lines***

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### **ABSTRACT:**

In modern world national identity becomes one of the most significant issues which creates big impact on people's life. In the past the migration of people from one country to another was forcible but now people tend to leave their motherland willingly to ensure a better life. The impact on human life is almost similar irrespective of the nature and cause of migration. But it is noted that any sort of movement from 'home' and new settlement on another place may disrupt the idea of culture and nationhood as well. People faces identity crisis while they adopt any new national identity. As such in their diasporic life people always face such issue that problematize their identity, nation and nationhood. The research focuses on how building up nationhood among the people is a problematic issue in diasporic situation by describing the characters of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. The paper also lights on how Amitav Ghosh's characters reveal the confusing relationship regarding race and nationality.

**Key words :** nation ;nationhood ;identity; diaspora; crisis

### **Introduction:**

Nation, Nationhood, National Identity are some buzzword in modern world. These topics are reflected in great extent in the writings of Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghose, Jhumpa Lahiri Anita Desai etc. Nationhood is the state of being an independent nation. Nationhood builds up among particular group or community who share common culture, language, morals, customs in a particular region and they feel like home at their region. In colonial and post-colonial India diaspora is a common reality of life for various reasons. People may leave their home for shorter period of time or longer period of time or permanently but ultimately they carry an invisible memory of their past home and identity. When people leave their house and try to settle in a foreign land, far remote from their birthplace they lost touch with their own culture. Even if they come back to their birthplace they could not find it same as before. No matter when and how they leave their birthplace it always creates some crisis. It is very natural for them that they lose the feeling of 'home' in new region. They cannot feel the new place as their home, and they feel a terrible psychological trauma to accept the changing condition of their living place and they go under a mental complexity as they feel inferior in the new dwelling place. It is also troublesome for the people who are new citizen in the target region. They may in other way round cause problem for the native people of that land as the latter find their land no longer remain as their own in terms of pure national and ethnic identity. In Indian post colonial literature written in English, especially in the writings of Amitav Ghosh it is found that the subject of nationhood is examined as a phenomena placed on the table of theoretical and literary discussions. To discuss the issue how dislocation is related to the formation of nationhood and national identity we select Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) as this novel offers a critical array of discussion on nationalism and identity by the inclusion of characters from different places, nationalities and religious identities

We would like to critically analyze this novel to examine the contesting concepts of identity and nationhood in the intersection of partition and impacts of colonial and post-colonial relationships among the various character in and outside the family of Thamma.

Many critical researches have been done on Amitav Ghosh's fictional works to find out different aspects of diaspora and displacement. But as far we know, very few researches have been done on how nationhood is under crisis and how the yearning emerged. One of the major problems which is created with national identity that people become homeless. They have no root in common. People could not recognize themselves with particular nation thus dilemmatic experience makes the people rootless. The objectives of this research is to show the yearning of nationhood. It also show the conflicting nature of nationhood as a complex issue. After analyzing the available major critical works on Amutav Ghosh, the general pattern that we find are discussed below and they are arranged in accordance with their chronological year of publication.

In the article " The Impact of post Colonialism in Amitav Ghosh's novels- A post Colonial perspective " ( January, 2016) Dr. Venkateswarlu Yesapagu sought major post colonial issues like diaspora, decolonization, nationalism, hybridity, margin and globalization etc and how these things create Impacts upon the narratives of Amitav Ghosh's fictions.

In a thesis titled "Language, history and society: An assessment of Amitav Ghosh's Selected Novels"(2015) Dr. Shivangi Srivastava Examined five novels of Amitav Ghosh to find out how history is narrated with the experience of individual characters

In another research paper entitled " Treatment of Diaspora in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction: a reading of his Selective novels" ( October,2015) Diponjoy Mukharjee discussed the issue of diaspora and how it affected the individual and collective life of people in post colonial or post independent period.

Dr. Mohit Kumar Tiwary tried to focus on the thematic issues of Amitav Ghosh's novels in his research paper entitled " The novels of Amitav Ghosh: A thematic Study " ( November, 2014). He focused on different post-colonial thematic issues, language, narrative style and innovative techniques etc in his paper.

In the thesis entitled "Identifying Women's Position: Exploring Time, Space and Sexuality in Amitav Ghosh's Novels" (December,2012) Tausif Sanzum tried to explore how women's life is affected by historical events.

In the essay entitled Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origine and Spread of Nationalism ( 1983) Benedict Anderson defined a nation as an imagined political community. He also depicts a nation as a socially-constructed community, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of a group

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### Methodology:

This present research is a qualitative research. The researcher follows the qualitative method here. It primarily relies on collecting,analyzing and evaluating the existing text. Other than using *The Shadow Lines* as primary source, the research uses various texts, published articles and thesis relevant to the topic. Besides online articles books on history and theories related to postcolonial literary criticism are also consulted.

The research follows various texts, including the primary text *The Shadow Lines* as well as some secondary texts that means related essays and criticisms to support the ideas and problems found in the primary text.

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### Discussion :

#### *The Yearning of Nationhood :*

The novel *The Shadow Lines* ( 1988) is primary a fiction of nationhood apart from a family saga narrated within the backdrop of the historical moment - before and after partition of India. National Identity is one's sense of belonging to one nation. Basically National Identity is viewed in psychological terms as awareness of difference or a feelings and recognition of 'we' and 'they' . We see Amitav Ghosh's treatment of nationhood as a problematic issue in the novel, because time, situation, place, politics have made the idea of nationhood complex .The concept of Nationhood fluctuates according to time and situation.

"Nation is not something real entity or has any substance rather we conceive it as an institutionalized form"( Brubaker 1994)

Most of us primarily think people will stick together who have the same culture, origin, customs but in the novel *The Shadow Lines* we see a different and complex scenario regarding nationhood. Tha'mma was born and brought up in Dhaka. She studied at the University of Dhaka. As a young woman in British India she desperately wanted to be a part of the terrorist groups that fought for India's independence from Britain. She was a passionate nationalist during Swadeshi movement and she was ready to do anything for the country. The partition of Indian subcontinent between India and Pakistan on the basis of religious communal division makes a great impact on the mind of people like Tha'mma who are divided about their National Identity. People can no longer behold a nationhood of unified India rather they are Indian or Pakistani. Nationalism of these people are only based on their religion -Hindu or Islam and ignores all other factors which constitute Nationhood for these people from time immemorial. So, people are in great dilemma in accepting nationality based on their religion.

People like Tha'mma are perfect examples who are Victim for these changes in history and politics. For Tha'mma, nationhood or belongingness to a particular nation is something to achieve for a long period of time with sacrificing life and blood generation after generation. It is not like Ila does now in London to mix her up with the culture and life style of London and ties her up with Englishness. To create a sense of belongingness to any particular nationhood is not an easy or temporary job indeed. Tha'mma make a bitter remarks on Ila

" Shall I tell you why Ila lives there? Shall I tell you what Ila's gone there for? She's gone there because she's greedy, she's gone there for money"( *The Shadow Lines* p.78)

Before partition Tha'mma could easily visit Dhaka whenever she wish but after partition the situation is changed, now she needs to follow a complex process. During her air journey from Calcutta to Dhaka she asked her son about whether she will be able to see the border Between India and Pakistan or anything which marks the separation of two countries. Her son laughs at her question. Then she makes her significant remarks through which Ghosh question the issue of boundary or nationhood and shows the hollowness of them. She says

" If there are not any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean where is the difference then? And if there's no difference both sides will be the same ; it will 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". ( *The Shadow Lines*, p. 151)

Borders have a tenuous existence, and that not even a history of bloodshed can make them real and visible. The separation between India and Pakistan gives birth to so many religious riots and political unrest both in India and Pakistan. When one is in such riots in Dhaka, Thamma's nephew Tridib and her Jethamosai is killed by the mobs. She gets furious towards Pakistan. When personal tragedy comes to Thamma's with the death of Tridib and Jethamosai she is no longer inclined to Bengali nationhood rather she starts to claim her identity as an Indian which is mostly based on Hindu religion. So we see her fluctuating state of nationhood. She also struggles to cope with the sudden realization that her birth in Dhaka means that she was born in East Pakistan. After Jethamosai and Tridib die in the riot, Thamma sells her favorite gold chain to fund the war against Pakistan, her birthplace! She was born over there in Dhaka, raised and educated from the same town and then at one point she feels that Dhaka is not her place! This way Amitav Ghosh's sketches the loopholes of nationhood. Actually Nation is nothing but a 'imagined community' without any strong base!

### ***Ila, Victim of Identity Crisis:***

On the other hand if we have a close look on Ila's character we will see her diasporic life makes her a cosmopolitan citizen of the world. As her father is an economist of UN, her family moves into different countries in different times. This diasporic nature of her life does give her a rare chance to settle in any particular region or give any space to her to think about her origin, Nationhood, national identity, or belongingness to particular culture. Since her childhood she has been travelling around the world. Although by birth she is an Indian, but she never feels comfortable to think her identity as Indian. Her diasporic life makes it difficult for her to make a deep connection with any place. She neither belongs to particular nationhood nor, she wishes it for her. A precise remark about her nature of her travelling is

"although she had lived in many places, she had never travelled at all" (The Shadow Lines, p. 21).

She remembers palaces in a peculiar way

"Oh yes, Cairo, the ladies is way away on the other side of the departure lounge" (The Shadow Lines, p. 20)

So her memory and experiences are not deep enough to be rooted in a particular region and makes her feel like a social or cultural nomad. She only visits Calcutta in her holidays with her parents. So it is very normal that she could not think herself as a part of Indian culture and territory. Thus, she could never feel that she belongs to Indian nationhood

Alongside, when she lives abroad although she tries her best to adjust with the foreign culture and wants to be treated as one of the members of these cultural groups all her efforts go in vain as we see she is inferior to the native people of these countries. This is clear to us when we learn about the incidents of her 'Yearbooks of International Schools' she always speaks highly about her school and schoolmates to hide her inferior position among them.

"Ila's closest friends were always the most beautiful, the most talented, the most intelligent girls in the school" (The Shadow Lines, P.22)

Ila introduces a boy whose name is Jamsed Tabrizi as her boyfriend to our narrator. She says about him that he is a fencing champion and that year his father gives him a BMW sports car as a birthday gift. But when our narrator sees the photograph of this boy in her school Yearbook who stands with his arms thrown around the shoulders of two laughing blonde girls while Ila stands back in the photograph as someone less important, Ila is shocked to learn that her false pride no longer exists now

"She saw that I had noticed, and when I came upon that Yearbook again a week later, I discovered that that page had been torn out" (The Shadow Lines, P.23)

At one side she does not like Indian culture and on the other hand she is not accepted by any foreign culture. That is why we see her face an identity crisis. In that way she becomes homeless, a human being without any permanent belongings to any region, culture, language and other things which will carry her national identity. Thus building up nationhood for her is a problematic subject to her due to her diasporic life. Through we may call that she is a cosmopolitan citizen but cosmopolitanism cannot provide her the peace and certainty what she is looking for her always in everywhere. She is a victim of nationhood

### ***Confusing State of Nationality:***

In the novel *The Shadow Lines* Mrs. Price's daughter May Price and Tridib begin a correspondence that lasts for four years and culminates in a visit to India. May is a person from another 'Nation' and she is visiting India. Near the end of her visit, she accompanies Tridib and Thamma to Dhaka and visits Thamma's ancestral home. According to Nationhood the English will save another English Citizen, The Bangali will save another Bengali. It's unimaginable that a Bangali can sacrifice his/her life to save an English. When a mob descends on Thamma's rickshaw, Thamma tells the driver to go, but May gets out to try to save Jethamosai. Tridib follows her, but Tridib, Jethamosai, and Khalil are all brutally murdered by the mob. May gets out of the car to save a Native! Tridib dies when he gets out of the car to protect her. May lives the rest of her life wondering if she killed Tridib, though she eventually comes to believe that Tridib sacrificed himself for her. Presumably because of what she saw in India and because of her guilt, she sleeps on the floor and fasts one day per week. May's understanding, affection, humanitarian mind denounce border or national identity and nationhood.

In the novel *The Shadow Lines* we see a violence which kills Robi's brother Tridib and makes him a victim to mob fury becomes part of his identity as a post-colonial Indian. After relating the incident of Tridib's death, Robi articulates his formulation of freedom and nationhood,

"Free... You know, if you look at the pictures on the front pages of the newspapers... dead people in Assam, the north east, Punjab, Sri Lanka, Tripura— people shot by terrorist and separatists and the army and the police,... everyone's doing it to be free... Why don't they draw thousands of little lines... and give every little place a new name? What would it change? ...How can anyone divide a memory?" (247).

Actually Hindu, Muslim, Bangali, Non Bangali, Indian, non Indian is not fact rather the dominating force is the fact there under so called nationhood. The idea of nationhood is nothing but a dark reality or just an imagination.

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### Conclusion :

We see the characters of Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* face the problem of their belongingness to any particular nation and that's the yearning of nationhood. They cannot decide what nation they belong as their identity is floating like river water in their life of movements. They move one place to another place and unable to remain with a fixed identity. The lacking of having any fixed identity drives them to their plight of nationhood. Ghosh's novel "The Shadow Lines" – the title itself suggesting the unreality and invalidity of constructions such as nation and nationality. May's behaviour, Jethamoshai's situation and killing, Thamm's trauma, Tridins killing all proved that nationhood is a politically constructed idea which is problematic.

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