

## **Nation and Borders in Question in The Shadow Lines**

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### **Abstract**

The Concept of nation has become a burning question in the recent years due to growing inquisitive interest to break the conventional cartographical portrayal of the nation-formation. Down the ages various opinions regarding the origin, birth and background of nation have left a profound influence for the critical study of the concept. New ideas and outlooks are gradually paving the way of alternative study of the nation. Amitav Ghosh's 'The Shadow Lines' is a pioneering effort in this ground. My paper attempts to analyze in details how the Shadow Lines becomes a critique at the concept of nation and borderlines.

### **Various Opinions regarding birth of the Nation**

In the acreage of the Postcolonial studies, the concept of nation has become a burning subject. Though the nation is treated as the prime factor in the modern progressive world both for its political and socio-economical importance the origin of nation is deeply rooted in the Western concepts of industrialism and capitalism. Benedict Anderson and Ernst Gellner have provided with the background of the origin of nation. According to Ernest Gellner the emergence of nation is related with the transformation from the pre-industrial or agricultural society to the industrial society. Gellner opines that the pre-historic society had internal cultural diversity as compared to the industrial society. These cultural diversities were responsible for the static or stagnant professional option – to follow the family or inherited profession of the people of agrarian society. So, the economic status was also not in a progressive motion. Gellner argues that economic progress depends upon the homogenic structure of the society which is absent in the pre-historic society. In the Industrial Society due to new inventions, modern technical system and developed organization constant changes are made not only in employing various methods but also in employing the human resources.

As a result of this change, the economic condition also develops and no more a person remains fixed or stucked to one profession for a long time. It also contributes to make the social organization as a complex form of organization. That is why there comes the need of homogenous and co-operative structure. To attain such homogenous status training must be given by an educational system following a homogenous system of education where state becomes the supreme authority. The demand of such state is nationalism where every state must have the idiom of maintaining only one homogenous nation. In this way industrialism helps to give birth to the concept of nation.

Like Gellner, Hegel also sees the origin of nation as a progressive journey from “the darkness of nature into the light of ‘History’, the prose of ‘History’, in turn, delivers the narrative of modernity. ‘History’ is the vehicle of national self-consciousness through which the incomplete human spirit progressively acquires an improved sense of its own totality. In other words, ‘History’ generates the national process through which the alienated essence of the individual citizen acquires a cohesive and reparative identity in the common life of the nation” (Gandhi, P.105) In this manner Hegel wants to posit the concept of nation as the most suitable form of socio-political system appropriate to the modern world.

Benedict Anderson in his momentum and influential book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, has thrown light on the concept of nation defining it as an “imagined political community that is imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson, P-6) and the individuals regard themselves as being part of such “imagined political community” (Anderson, P-6) which has a sense of “a deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson, P-7). The community is imagined as it is not possible for the members to meet or know every other member of the community. Yet, they assume to have a whole community in their mind. Moreover, despite various inequalities or diversities among the people, they share a kind of “horizontal comradeship” (Anderson, P-7). Timothy Brennan has precisely pointed out that the nation denotes not only the contemporary concept of nation-state in the recent time, but also it indicates to the ancient concept of “nation” or a local community. Hence, the concept of nation is “Nations of collectivity and belonging, a mutual sense of community that a group of individuals imagines it shares” (McLeod, P-69).

Anderson has also elaborately argues that “the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm”, (Anderson, P-7). The European Enlightenment,

helping to crush the age-old belief and the primacy of the mysteries created by the religion about the divine-kingship and presence of divine consciousness, has compelled people to think rationally and logically such radical secularism evoked by the Enlightenment has established the necessity of an orderly organized nation.

From the above mentioned discussion a few things come in the mind, that deserves mention. The nation is an imagined community with a sense of belonging, mutual understanding, home and urge for the need of an ordered social system. The nation also helps to evoke the sense of being rightful owners of a particular land having one unitary language and continuity between past and present. Anderson has also points out the nation is “limited” because it doesn’t matter whether the nation is small or large in size, every nation should have a border beyond which lies the border of another nation. That means the nation places borders in order to show the difference between people of various nations.

### **A Derivative Discourse**

The European form of nationalism and nation being part of the industrialism movement and democracy believe in establishing the universal claim of liberty in the world “Anderson, among others, persuasively argues that this newly contrived. European nation-ness immediately acquired a ‘modular’ character which rendered it capable of dissemination and transplantation in a variety of disparate terrains” (Gandhi, P-113). Hence, the European form of nationalism wants to posit a universalized form of nation-ness refusing the urge or necessity of any alternative nationalism while emphasizing on the concepts of liberty and progress. But this liberal view of the nation has a paradox in its heart. The nineteenth century predatory colonialism is another form of nationalism rather it is the hostile form of the European nationalism. Though the civilizing mission of the colonialism proudly tries to prove them as the torch bearer of modernity, progress and education, the actual face under the veil is destructive and pugnacious. In reality, colonialism or imperialism can be viewed as a relationship between two ruling forces in order to grasp the markets and territories for their expansion of empire and to strengthen the economic health of their own nation-state. Benedict Anderson regards this process as the birth of ‘Official Nationalism’ that pulls ‘the short, tight skin of the nation over the gigantic body of the empire’ (Anderson, P-86). This is a great paradoxical position rooted at the heart of the concept of the nation.

Imperialism or the domination of the first world countries over the third world countries have helped to place border, partitions and divisions among various nations. As a result of such divisions people have to suffer a lot or become homeless or suffer from the

feeling of ‘unhomeliness’. To clearly point or mark various newly created nation as a result of colonialism many lines, borders and maps have been drawn by the colonizers. Maps marks in a way the limitation of a particular space beyond which lies the border of another space. The imperialists see the process of mapping as an integral part of cartographic territorial manifestation, a knowledge of placing border lines in order to rule, of which they regard themselves as great masters. They have simply ignored the concept of “cartographic aggression” in the sub-continent for exploiting the world’s resources. In the similar vein Lloyd Brown has opined: “The nations that have been most interested in the establishment of colonies and a world trade have contributed more than to the establishment of a science of cartography” (Brown, P-11).

The European or Western rulers have remodeled the art of mapping according to their own need or for the expansion of the empire considering maps as an important “weapon of imperialism” (Harley, P-282). As already discussed for every nation a particular border line and map have been set by the colonizers, the concept of nation has been constructed in order to hold political control over the world. As Black points out in this book ‘Maps and Politics’: “The map of the world or a region thereof, divides up its land space (although not generally the seas) in terms of territorial control and political authority: the map as assertion of sovereignty. States, such as France and Germany, are the building blocks of such a map... Other methods of organizing space at this scale, indeed of presenting political space, are ignored (Black, P-12).

### **Nation and Borders in question in The Shadow lines**

In the shadow lines, the criticism of the concept of nation and nationalism is clearly portrayed by Amitav Ghosh rendering the unrealistic demarcation of one space from another by drawing delusory lines. The basic concept of the novel thus sheds light on the shadowy lines between nations and the consequent destruction caused by the very act.

“At the stroke of the midnight nor, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul at a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance”. (Nehru)

With the birth of the nation, India, and the portrayal of the border lines around the nation a homogenized identity has been imposed on the people silencing multiple voices with a nation as the chief political aim of a nation-state is “to exist at all they must claim the monopoly of all relationships between people”. (Ghosh, P-230).

The story of the novel, the shadow lines, unfolds through the recollections of the unnamed narrator. There are two contradictory forces shown in the figures of narrator's Grandmother and Tridib and the critique of the concept of nation, nationalism and borderlines have been emerged through the conflicting ideologies of those two figures. Grandmother believes in aggressive form of nationalism and in the homogenizing notion of national identity. She asserts to her grandson, "They know they're a nation because they have drawn their borders with blood... War is religion. That's what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born in 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 do for India, don't you see?" (Ghosh, 77-78). Therefore, it can be stated that nation can emerge out of groups of people having shared identity. But, she forgets the realistic fact that a nation is constructed by drawing lines or porous borders causing fractured identities and lives. Dislocation, rootlessness, bleak future and economically miserable condition are consequences caused by the portrayal of borders and formation of various nations.

Grandmother fails to understand this horrible reality. "She is confounded by the enigma of her mismatched place of origin and citizenship, by the absence of any bold line or trench or something marking the border and by the amazing experience of landing at an airport, identical to the one she has left behind in her country. She is hurt to see how her lack of political right over her birthplace ignores her emotional claim over it. Her odyssey from her 'invented country' to 'home' is neither a proper nor a happy homecoming" – (Roye, P-83). The nationalism of Thamma left a deep impact on the child-brain of the narrator. He admits that due to the influence of his grandmother, he used to believe in spatial distance as "corporeal substance" (Ghosh, 218), in the existence of a separate reality across the border and in the concept of nation as described by Thamma. Gradually his eyes about the alternative vision of reality are opened under the influence of Tridib. Tridib has shown the narrator how one can look at the alternative nation regarding world or nation. Distances, cartography, maps and border lines are all socially constructed barriers and imposed on the people pointing out the limitation of a nation. Maps reify a certain view of space. The Western Europe during the colonial period placed strong emphasize on the demarcation of nation-state by precise line in order to hide the constructed nature of nation-state by putting a veil of 'natural' geographical structure over it. Thus, the nation-state is portrayed as an immutable organism created by imaginary lines in order to denote unambiguously those people born within calibrated view of space.



The narrator's reference to the Bartholomew's Atlas and employment of the map and a pair of compasses to draw circle indirectly in an implied manner sheds light on the alternative creation of cartographies that "undermine the foregrounding of nations as the central units on the map" (Chambers, P-33). The narrator wants to remodule the established or generally accepted pattern of world map encompassing the stable boundary lines of many places with the purpose of merging multiple spaces together. Maps are drawn to create nation and besides the act of nation-formation, maps divide or separate one nation from another. Thus, it helps to impose forced homogenized identity over the people of a particular nation as their national identity by marginalizing all other identities. They do not celebrate the notion of cross-cultural collaboration. Ghosh in the Shadow Lines exposes all these assumption of the nation and nationalism. He wants to point out the very fact that lines which are formulating the nation are actually shadowy or imaginary. One can cross across the drawn boundaries if not physically but mentally in order to decrease the constructed distance or to celebrate the cross-cultural relationship.

The character of Tridib is very important from this perspective. It is he who has given the narrator "worlds to travel in and.....dyes to see them with" (Ghosh, 20). The narrator has been inspired to see the world through the mind's eyes as narrated by Tridib. One should use one's imagination and the desire of travelling distant places with the alternative view of self-constructed cartography clearly points out the overcoming of distance between "the self and the other" (Majumdar, P-99). The desire of mingling of multiple places can be viewed as a practice to break the political boundaries – a symbol of power of the authority – across time and space. During Thamma's mission of bringing her uncle back to her 'home', India, Thamma and other persons along with her have to face violent mob. Tridib tries to rescue his friend and he is murdered by the angry mob. Tridib's death is of symbolic significance. This sacrifice "can shake the monopoly of the government's authority, can break the illusion of difference creating distance and distance creating difference, can expose the arbitrariness and atrocity of drawing 'shadow lines'... can hail humanity over politics, can place relations of the heart over borders of the nation..." (Roye, P-85).

### **Conclusion**

From the above discussed facts it can be stated that the imaginary lines become metaphor of the actual political reality behind creation of the nation as an immutable organism which is fixed and constructed in nature. Ghosh breaks the conventional cartography, reformulate it and tries to cross the physical frontiers proving them as shadowy and illusory.

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