

Shadow Lines

The origin of the nation-state can be traced back to the French Revolution of 1789. Since the ‘nation’s’ modern and recent conception; Nationalism, the feeling arising out of nationhood or belonging or devotion to the interests or culture of one’s nation, has been defined by various scholars, researchers and artists in the past two centuries in insightful yet conflicting fashion. Benedict Anderson, in his ground breaking work *Imagined Communities*, defines a nation as an “imagined political community that is imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign”<sup>1</sup> Rabindranath Tagore is rather critical and denounces nationalism as “a cruel epidemic of evil.”<sup>2</sup> Samuel T. Coleridge is contrastingly equal in his praise for the nation, when he says, “A nation is the unity of a people.” Eqbal Ahmad classifies nationalism as “an ideology of difference” and “collective identity [built] on the basis of the Other.”<sup>3</sup> Through his work *Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh too, is joining the fray, questioning the fixity of culture and whether cultures can be contained within boundaries demarcated by maps. He brings forth all sides of this intellectual dilemma through his various characters and the different opinions they hold about nations and nationalism. Here we discuss the nationalistic views and ideas of the two main female characters, the narrator’s grandmother Tha’mma and his cousin, Ila.

One of the biggest influences on the narrator, his grandmother, Tha’mma epitomizes the ideals of the Nationalist movement and values of India’s national identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Anderson, Benedict. (*Imagined Communities*. London: Verso, 1991.) p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Tagore, Rabindranath. *Nationalism*. (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1917.) p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> Ahmad, Eqbal. *Confronting Empire*. (Cambridge: South End Press, 2000). p. 75.

She has a blind love for her nation, though her nationality is certainly questionable as she is a migrant from Dhaka during the partition of India. The inquiry into her nationality as well the determination of nationality is made when Tha'mma has to fill out a form on her trip to Dhaka, to persuade her nonagenarian uncle to leave Dhaka, which is in the midst of a revolution and come to Calcutta with her. While filling out the form, she fills in her nationality swiftly and without hesitation as 'Indian' but starts wondering about her roots and origin once she writes her place of birth as Dhaka, Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). This raises the question, even in the reader's mind, as to how nationality is or should be determined. Does birth in a country give you right to nationality? And if so, then how does your nationality change if the borders demarcating your nation change? The author leaves the reader questioning. Later, Tha'mma's uncle Jethamoshai/Ukil-babu sums it up best, when he says "I don't believe in this India-Shindia. [...] suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? [...] As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here."<sup>4</sup>

While Tha'mma was in college she dreamt of being part of militant groups who struck against the British imperialist rulers. She was fascinated by their ways, though she didn't know much about them and wasn't sure how to find out more about them as they operated clandestinely. One day, when a group of policemen came to her college and arrested the quietest student from the last bench as a member of the group who had been assigned to murder an English magistrate in the Khulna district, Tha'mma was shocked as well as rueful that she missed an opportunity to be a part of the freedom struggle. She tells the narrator that "she would have been content to run errands for them, to cook their

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<sup>4</sup> Ghosh, Amitav. Shadow Lines. (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publishers, 1998.). p. 213.

food, wash their clothes, anything”, for she understood that she was a woman and she had to subordinate her wishes to those of the ‘active’ male members.<sup>5</sup> The author underscores the limited role of women in the national movement. But it is interesting to note the willingness with which Tha’mma is ready to take up these jobs. It gives the reader a glimpse into the lesser reported facts, like violent militancy, of the Indian freedom struggle.

On her return to Dhaka, after a span of about twenty years, Tha’mma feels like a stranger and keeps questioning as to where her “old Dhaka” is. She even starts to feel like a foreigner. Tridib, the narrator’s eccentric genius uncle, rubs it in by telling Tha’mma “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.”<sup>6</sup> The reader is once again made to question the validity of nations and the restrictions upon the free movement of people through them. Someone born in the country is made to obtain a visa to re-enter it, while the citizen of the colonial oppressing power is allowed free entry into it. This satire doesn’t go unnoticed. The author goes on in the same vein when he talks about Tha’mma’s ignorance about a real border. She gets very offended, when the narrator’s father mockingly asks “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.”<sup>7</sup> Tha’mma’s old Indian nationalist mentality can’t perceive the reasoning behind all the killing and partitioning “if there isn’t something in between?” and goes on to prove to fallacy of borders.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ghosh, p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> Ghosh, p. 195.

<sup>7</sup> Ghosh, p. 151.

<sup>8</sup> Ghosh, p. 151.

Tha'mma's nationalistic streak is displayed once again when she donates her most prized possession – a ruby that she had around her neck in a golden necklace all her life – to the “War Fund” after returning from Dhaka. This was triggered by the fact that her nephew Tridib was murdered by religious zealots during the riots. Donating money to fight the ‘evil’ nation was the only way that a country could survive. Here Anderson's comments that “nations inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love” ring true<sup>9</sup>

The author embodies the ideas of western nationalism and the denial of history to the third world through the narrator's ‘white-washed’ cousin Ila. Through Ila, Ghosh challenges the western orientation of history, the history written by the victors but not necessarily the true history. She articulates the western disregard for eastern or third world calamities, when she tells her shocked cousin that “nothing really important ever happens where you are.”<sup>10</sup> Ila does acknowledge the fact that the third world suffers a lot of rioting, famines and other calamities, but nothing as important as revolutions or anti-fascist wars. The author underscores his point, by portraying an obviously biased western view point and the relative significance of things in the western world. Another Bengali writer Rabindranath Tagore makes a similarly reproachful remark on the western newspapers, saying they “take the scantiest notice of calamities happening in India over areas of land sometimes bigger than the British Isles.”<sup>11</sup>

Ila also compares her activist living to that of Alan Tresawson and his friends during the Second World War. She notes that “there's a kind of heroism in their pointless

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<sup>9</sup> Anderson, p. 141.

<sup>10</sup> Ghosh, p. 104.

<sup>11</sup> Tagore, p. 24.

deaths”<sup>12</sup> This portrayal of the western perception goes well with Anderson’s thesis on nations, where he says that “Dying for the revolution also draws its grandeur from the degree to which it is felt to be something fundamentally pure.”<sup>13</sup> He goes on to say that “Dying for one’s country, assumes a moral grandeur which dying for the Labour Party, the American Medical Association or perhaps even Amnesty International can not rival.”<sup>14</sup>

Ila’s views can’t totally be ruled out because as a woman there are many restrictions put on her while she is in India. A major incident where, she is forced out of a Cabaret Bar in the Grand Hotel in Calcutta by her uncle Robi, shows the reader how constrained and restrictive, life for women in India is. The author portrays her narrator’s mother as the middle-class wife, whose main aim in life is to make life for the husband and child as comfortable as possible. This certainly wouldn’t wash down very well with western feminist movements!

Jokes apart, this book puts forth a lot of important questions that the reader is hard-pressed to find. The questions of nationalism are hard to grasp and the answers harder still. One can’t help but remember Edgar Allan Poe’s lines – “All that we see or seem, Is but a dream within a dream.”<sup>15</sup> Or Robi’s disgruntled take on borders and nationalism, when he suggests “why don’t they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every little place a new name? What would it change? It’s a mirage; the whole thing is a mirage.”

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<sup>12</sup> Ghosh, p. 104.

<sup>13</sup> Anderson, p. 144.

<sup>14</sup> Anderson, p. 144.

<sup>15</sup> Poe, Edgar Allan. The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe. (New York: J. S. Redfield, 1850.) p. 40.

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