Journal of Advances and Scholarly Researches in Allied Education
Vol. XV, Issue No. 1, April-2018, ISSN 2230-7540

Deconstructing the Discourse of Nationalism: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

Ranveer Singh*

Assistant Professor, Baba Balraj Panjab University Constituent College, Balachaur, Punjab

Abstract – The Shadow Lines explores the conflict between nationalism and a migrant cosmopolitanism, of religion and nationality, of belonging and displacement, and necessity of suppressing memories that threaten to disrupt the tidy narrative of history and national identity. The novel focuses on nationalism, the shadow line we draw between people and nations, which is both an absurd illusion and a source of terrifying violence. But it also sees as illusions so many other demarcations and categories of human experience and understanding that it ends up attributing value and a higher reality to a sort of amorphous romantic subjectivity.

Key Words – Discourse, Nationalism, National Identity, Communalism, Globalization, Belongingness, Displacement, Communalism, Decolonization etc.

----------X----------

INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh, a world renowned novelist and author, was born in Kolkata (Calcutta) in 1956. The writings of Amitav Ghosh have often been seen as exercises that extended beyond the genres which frame them. This applies, to a great extent, to most of what Ghosh has written fiction as well as non-fiction. Several researches have been conducted on the novels of Amitav Ghosh. Different scholars have analyzed his novels with different perspectives. The present study is based on the assumption that the fictional works of Amitav Ghosh reflect a confluence of history and human insights.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* explores the conflict between nationalism and a migrant cosmopolitanism, of religion and nationality, of belonging and displacement, and necessity of suppressing memories that threaten to disrupt the tidy narrative of history and national identity. The novel focuses on the unnamed narrator's family in Calcutta and Dhaka, and their connection with an English family in London, spanning the period from the nineteen thirties to the present. The relationship between the narrator's grandmother and her animosity toward her sister's son's daughters Ila emblematizes the conflict between nationalism and a migrant cosmopolitanism, even as it makes visible the limits and failures of both these middle - class women.

Ghosh also highlights the 'minor riots' within India that are crucial in forming the psyche of the subcontinent. He attempts to reveal the manner in which these riots are quite deliberately wiped out of national memory, because they serve to undermine and disrupt the dominant historiography's neat narrative of battles with foreign enemies, located outside national borders, and fraught with the methodology and rationality of organized warfare.

Crossing of frontiers– especially those of nationalities, culture and language– has increased the world over, including India. Of this tendency *The Shadow Lines* is an extreme example. The novel focuses on nationalism, the shadow line we draw between people and nations, which is both an absurd illusion and a source of terrifying violence. But it also sees as illusions so many other demarcations and categories of human experience and understanding that it ends up attributing value and a higher reality to a sort of amorphous romantic subjectivity.

For Ghosh this obligation to forget becomes the site of unacknowledged fears, the fear of oneself, that shapes the psyche of the people of the subcontinent; this in turn prohibits them from realizing the complexities of their identities which have been fractured by the temporality and spatiality of their past. This national will to forget serves to proscribe the people and limit them to the parameters of a national identity produced by focusing on major events, or 'defining moments'. It does not allow them to confront the reality of their multi-layered present identity which is created as identity as much by the continuities as by the disruptions between the past and the present.

The Shadow Lines sets out to uncover and confront fearful suppressed memories in an attempt to unsettle the simplified, seamless narrative of

national identity. The unnamed narrator of *The Shadow Lines* comes in contact with different, often contradictory, versions of national and cultural identity through the main characters in the novel- his grandmother, Tha'mma, his cousin, Ila, and his uncles, Tridib and Robi. Growing up in an upwardly mobile middle-class professional family in Calcutta, the narrator acquires the sensibility of a metropolitan, bi-lingual, English speaking, post-colonial subject; his interactions with his cousin and uncles whose fathers are globe-trotting diplomats, and his own stint in London for research work make his attitude and approach to issues of nation and culture more cosmopolitan; one of the most powerful influences in his life as a child, however, is his grandmother, a fiercely independent, militantly nationalist woman. Tha'mma is an embodiment of the national and cultural identity constructed by the dominant state ideology which in turn is proposed by the accepted national historiography.

Though Tha'mma had not actively participated in the anti-imperialist movement, she believed in it passionately. She recounts an experience to the narrator in which one of her fellow students was arrested by the police for plotting to shoot an English magistrate in Khulna. After the arrest she often dreamt about him and wished that she too could have gone with him to wait for the magistrate with a pistol in her hand. The narrator asks, "Do you really mean, Tha'mma,.. that you would have killed him?" And she answers, "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" (44-45). Tha'mma's nationalist militancy that becomes the foundation for her concept of a nation-state which would be formed through violent struggle and nurtured through hard work and unflinching principles; citizenship in this nation-state cannot be acquired easily, for it must be earned by its members.

Ghosh uses the character of Tha'mma to serve as a mouthpiece for the dominant discourse of the nation, one that produces knowledge about national identity by focusing on the movement of its birth through the blood-sacrifice of war, and defines it in geo-political terms through its boundaries that serve to exclude others while bestowing unity and brotherhood on all those included within it. He then exposes the instability of this discourse through Tha'mma's nervous breakdown when she is forced to confront the falsity of her illusions.

Led by her convictions about nationality, religion and belonging start getting disturbed when she returns to her birthplace in Dhaka, Bangladesh, after a gap of many years, and for the first time after partition. Firmly entrenched in the belief in nations effectively separated by borders, she is startled when told that she would not be able to see any dividing distinction between India and East Pakistan from the plane since in the modern world borders are crossed within airports when disembarkation form are filled out with information about nationality, date of birth, place of birth, etc. The narrator says:

My grandmother's eyes widened and she slumped back in her chair... . It was not till many years later than I realized. It had suddenly occurred to her then that she would have to fill in 'Dhaka' as her place of birth on that form, and the prospect of this had worried her... because she liked things to be neat and in place- and at that moment she had not been quite able to understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality. (155)

Tha'mma's quandary is paradigmatic for millions of people on the subcontinent, and it is an attempt to deal with this situation of being "messily at odds" that the discourse of nationhood places emphasis on the corporeality of space and distance, and places its faith in the infallibility of the shadow lines of borders. Functioning antithetically to Tha'mma's ideology of linking religion and nationality to nationhood is her uncle who refuses to be "rescued" from the Muslim East Pakistan in order to live in India with his Hindu relatives. "I don't believe in this India-Shindia", he says to his sons when they migrate to India during partition. "Its all very well, you are going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then?... I was born here, and I will die here" (216).

Tha'mma finally loses her grasp on reality when Tridib is killed in post-colonial Dhaka by a violent Muslim mob which has organized itself, like other Hindu and Muslim mobs across the border independently of the state war machinery. The Hindu-Muslim riots, then, are manifestation of violence that is not organised and contained by the state, indeed, has escaped the authority and control of the government. The eruption of this violence lies outside the rhetoric of organised warfare with enemies across borders and thus destabilizes the settled discourse of nationhood. Piecing together the story of Tridib's death many years later, the narrator says of the riots:

But for these other things we can only use words of description when they happen and then fall silent, for to look for words of any other kind would be give them meaning, and that is a risk we cannot take any more than we can afford to listen to madness. (228)

Tha'mma's nationalism sustains itself by a desire to perpetuate the values of common heritage and by striving towards building a better nation. In this regard her view is reminiscent of Ernest Renan's idea of nation propounded in his essay "Qu'estce qu'une nation?" Renan here asserts that:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Only two things, actually, constitute this soul, this spiritual principle. One is the past, the other is the present. One is in the possession of a rich legacy of

remembrances; the other is the actual consent, the desire to live together, the will to continue to value the heritage which all holds in common. A heroic past ... is the social principle on which the national idea rests. To have common glories in the past, a common will in the present; to have accomplished great things together, to wish to do so again, that is the essential condition for being a nation (qtd. in Sapra 59).

Therefore Tha'mma would force her grandson to exercise, for "you can't build a strong nation... without building a strong body" (8). For her, Robi's physical strength is nothing but good raw material for nation-building "watch Robi, he is strong and is not like the rest of you in this country" (35).

Our last glimpse of Tha'mma in the novel is when the India-Pakistan war of 1965 is declared: She is standing with her hair hanging in wet ropes over her face, eyes glazed, spectacles fallen off, smashing the glass front of the radio and gouging out flesh and blood against it. "We're fighting them properly at last with, with tanks and guns and bombs" (238) she says hysterically.

In contrast to Tha'mma's nationalist militant fervor and hysteria, Ghosh presents the quite strength and sanity of the narrator's uncle, Robi. Through two or three strategic episodes Ghosh builds up Robi as a person possessing intuitive moral convictions and having the courage to stand behind them in the face of opposition.

Unlike Tha'mma's morality and convictions which are formed by internalizing the rhetoric of the dominant patriarchal, nationalist culture, Robi is less influenced by eternal power structures. His morality comes from within, and early in the novel Ghosh establishes the fundamental sensitivity and humanity of Robi when as a school boy he beats up the school bully, a boy much older than himself, and is not tempted by his victory to occupy the bully's vanquished space. Ghosh, however, is careful to point out the shaping influence of the patriarchal culture of India on Robi in the incident when he refuses to let his niece, Ila, dance with strange men in a nightclub: "You can do what you like in England, he said. But there are certain things you cannot do. That's our culture; that's how we live" (92).

Robi is then constructed in the novel as an upright, principled, moral man who is not swayed by socio-political pressures, but who is at the same time intrinsically Indian in his cultures and values, Robi's position as spokesman for a post-colonial Indian identity is strengthened by his witnessing, and later relating, the death of Tridib. Born in the Post-colonial era, Robi grows up with the certitude of a unitary identity as a citizen of independent, secular India, and does not have to confront the necessarily fractured sense of self as do those who experienced decolonization and partition. The experience of the riot in Bangladesh in which his brother is killed is then essential in enabling him to articulate a representative consciousness.

The senseless violence that kills Robi's brother and makes his victim to mob fury becomes part of his identity as Post-colonial Indian. After relating the manner of Tridib's death and his recurring nightmares about it to Ila and the narrator one night in London, Robi articulates his formulation of freedom and nationhood:

Free... .You know, if you look at the pictures on the front pages of the newspapers at home now, all those pictures of dead people in Assam, the north-east, Punjab, Sri Lanka, Tripura - people shoot by terrorists and separatists and the army and the police, you will find somewhere behind it all that single word: everyone's doing it to be free... And then I think to myself, 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. How can anyone divide a memory? (247).

For Tha'mma freedom became the ultimate signifier of selfhood and identity; for Robi it is only a mirage, an illusion. Unlike Tha'mma's concept of the nation which is rejected as inadequate through the narrative of the text Robi's formulation of the nationhood as a state that should be able to perceive the fragility of borders in the construction of identity is supported elsewhere by the narrator. Reflecting back on Ila's rage at forcibly being stopped from dancing at a nightclub and her assertion that she lived in London to be "free of your bloody culture", the narrator says:

I thought of how much they all wanted to be free, how they went mad wanting their freedom; I began to wonder whether it was I that was mad because I was happy to be bound: whether I was alone in knowing that I could not live without the clamor of the voices within me (93).

For Robi and the narrator, then, freedom is not achieved through battle with oppressors, or by drawing lines around the nation; freedom exists within the individual; and both of them have irrevocably lost that sense of being free because of their experiences of the post-colonial Hindu-Muslim riots in India and Bangladesh. "If freedom were possible," says Robi, "surely Tridib's death would have set me free" (247). The narrator locates the futility of achieving freedom in the fear which arises from the knowledge that the normal, everyday world that one inhabits can turn hostile without warning.

Though Robi's rejection of the dominant ideology of freedom, and the narrator's articulation of the special quality of loneliness' as the distinguishing feature of the people of subcontinent, Ghosh is then attempting a critique of the construction of the shadow lines of borders as signifiers of freedom

and nationhood. Through his critique of Tha'mma's version of nationalism, and the naiveté of placing faith in national borders, Ghosh is pointing to the limitations of realizing identity through the discourse of nationhood. He articulates the need to conceptualize issues of identity in terms of larger cultural and historical collectivities. When the narrator discovers that the cause for the riots that he was trapped in as a child in Calcutta was the same one that gave rise to the riots that killed Tridib in Dhaka, he thinks to himself:

The simple fact was that there had never been a moment in the 4000 year-old history of that map when the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines- so closely that I, in Calcutta, had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free- our looking glass border. (234)

Ghosh comments on the manner in which the educated middle class perpetuates its status through an English education and uses this as a buffer against the conditions of existence of the rest of the population. It is from this position that the narrator and Ghosh himself address the small percentage of educated, English speaking Indians. While Ghosh is very consciously writing from a middleclass, educated, metropolitan, privileged background, he is unable to represent any other class position in the novel. Ghosh presents different versions of freedom and its importance in the construction of identity through almost all the major characters in the novel - Tha'mma, Robi, Ila, Tridib, and the narrator; but all these versions emanate from the same privileged class position. Tha'mma's narrative of the nationalist movement is a reiteration of the dominant nationalist historiography constructed by the ruling elite who share her class status. Ila and Tridib's attempt to be free of the restrictions of national and cultural ethics arise from their access to a cosmopolitan world far beyond the imagination of the average Indian citizen. And the narrator's and Robi's articulation of the belief that socio-political freedom is impossible is directly related to their own personal freedom and the ability to choose that arises from their educated, male position. Their access to a cosmopolitan makes it easier for them to believe in the fragility of geo-political borders, in the restricting, rather than defining, nature of boundaries. They do not have to bear the burden of the double standards that placed the weight of sexual and cultural definition unequally on women. They are not subject to the kind of conflicts that Ila has to confront in her attempt to negotiate between two cultures, conflicts that are created by a patriarchal code of conduct to which her uncle and cousin comfortably adhere. The discourse of freedom in the novel is thus restricted within this parameter of privilege which applies to a very small, albeit powerful, percentage of the population, and is therefore not able to represent the full importance of this issue to the construction of a national identity.

In *Studies in Heterogeneity: A Reading of Two Recent Indo-Anglian Novels*, P.K. Dutta argues that one of the preoccupations of this novel is the "logic of one and its other, sameness and differences with its meanings in the epistemology of binaries." Dutta establishes his argument by focusing on the human relationships, which he sees as structured around the different families in the novel. Towards the end of the essay Dutta ask:

But what does one do with differences that are based on differential access to social power to which the institution if family is not immune? It is significant that Ghosh does not extend the problems that emerge from the narrator's social difference with his slum-dwelling refugee aunt. Further, the capacity of the family as an institution to create differences by allowing some members to exercise oppression and control is not something that enters the terms of Ghosh's enquiry. (67)

Thus, while Ghosh makes references to the way in which class and gender serve to privilege and disempower, he does not take cognizance of them in his construction of a national identity.

Ghosh's representation of female subjectivity in the novel is equally uneven. In spite of the narrator's close relationship to the three major women characters, Tha'mma, Ila and May- Ghosh does not utilize the importance of their position to give voice to a woman's subjectivity. Partha Chatterjee writes in his essay on *Colonialism*, *Nationalism and Colonized women*. The contest in India:

The colonial discourse we have heard, so far is a discourse about women; women do not speak here. It is a discourse which assigns to women a place, a sign, an objectified value; women here are not subjects with a will and a consciousness. We now have to ask very different questions to allow women in recent Indian history to speak for themselves. (319)

Although Ghosh's women characters are central to his narrative, for the most part they bear the burden of articulating certain positions, such as those of militant nationalism, cosmopolitan, etc. They function as signs rather than as subjects with a will and consciousness.

The narrative of *The Shadow Lines* moves among continuously shifting temporal and spatial planes, so that the narrative time coincides with the consciousness of the narrator, whether he is listening to someone else's stories, or recalling his own memories; and not with any fixed temporal mode.

The narrator's grandmother is wholly committed to the nationalist ideal of independent India, and at one

point tells the narrator she would have killed for her country's freedom, which for her is equivalent to her personal freedom. For the narrator's mother, "... relatives and family were the central points which gave the world its shape and meaning; the foundations of moral order. But my grandmother on the other hand had never pretended to have much family feelings; she had always founded of moral order... on larger and more abstract entities" (129).

The progressivist and nationalist narrative of events leading up to and following independence are the frame through which she looks at them, and for nearly all her life she acts according to these principles. The core of her conviction is perhaps best echoed in J.L. Nehru's *The Discovery of India*, which S. Tharu and K. Lalita define as a "Foundation fiction" for the nation:

Some kind of a dream of unity has occupied the mind of India since the dawn of civilization. That unity was not conceived as something imposed from outside, standardization of externals or even of beliefs. It was something deeper and, within its field, the widest tolerance of belief and custom was practiced and every variety acknowledges and even encouraged. (88)

National identity is essentially defined by its difference from what is perceived as other, outside the national boundaries. The grandmother says as much to the narrator, when she tells him why she disapproves of Ila's "going away" from India, the country to which she belongs, to live in England:

Ila has no right to live there, she said hoarsely. She does not belong there. It took those people a long time to build that country; hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed... . They know they are a nation because they have 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 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. (78)

The grandmother, at this point of the narrative, is fervently convinced that the nation has a clearly determined point of origin, represented by the nationalist wars of liberation. She associates images of flesh and blood with the nation, perceiving it as a living body. She wants her grandson to become a good second-generation Indian citizen, with a strong body, because without a strong body, you don't have a strong country.

For Ila, the grandmother's nationalist ideal is tantamount to fascism, but the narrator contradicts her angrily on this point. She is only "a modern middle class woman", (78) but without 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 middle-class life, a small thing that history had denied her in its fullness and for which she could never forgive it. (78)

Mrs. Rupa Mehra in Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* can be seen as her more sentiment counterpart, whose Indian bourgeois values so stubbornly resilient that they form the ethical basis of the novel, as is exemplified by its title.

The grandmother cannot understand why Ila wants to live in a country to which she does not belong; it must be because of the material comforts. The narrator tries to explain to her that it is because Ila wants to be free of the cultural constraints her country imposes upon women, a problem highlighted by the sense with Robi at the nightclub in Calcutta. Ila and the grandmother are at the opposite ends of the chain that ties together the nationalist linear narrative to the post-colonial fragmented one; in a way, Ila and the narrator are the problematic result of Indian Independence. Freedom has not obtained by independence, especially for women. But Ila will never be free of her past, and of the people who live in India, and are tied to her, like the narrator. You can never be free of me, I shouted through the open window. If I were to die tomorrow you would not be free of me. You can not be free of me because I am within you ... just as you are within me. (89)

Of course the opposition between Ila and the grandmother is not so simple. The older woman is jealous of what Ila means to the narrator. She calls her a whore and feels she has corrupted her grandson, and this antagonism explodes in a posthumous hate against the narrator. She firmly believes in the use of violence to establish nationhood; there is not pacifist Gandhian ideal at work here. What the opposition reveals is that living in independent India is a process which is inherently gendered. The contradiction in the modern middle-class woman's nationalist narrative come to the surface when she is confronted with a girl like Ila, living in the difficult post-colonial conditions, who prefers the harshness of London life to the over protectiveness of Calcutta, in order to be free.

Ghosh seems to be indicating here that Indian nationalism elided the problematic issue of gender, not including it as an item on its agenda. S. Tharu and K. Lalita give an account of "how totally invisible the subjugation of women had been rendered in the ideology of liberal nationalism." (88)The general tendency, during the nationalist period, was to believe that universal suffrage would automatically guarantee equality, and, until after independence the congress party never made an effort to ensure electoral seats for women.

Ila together with grandmother, is probably the character who feels the most need to adhere to a received narrative, a reassuring master-myth with a built-in teleology that guarantees "freedom" at the end of the road. She does not understand the narrator's intricate, novelistic web of relations which connect his personal landmarks. She can only ascribe his feeling of being "unfree" in London to his sense of belonging to a history essentially defined in relation to colonialism. Her discourse, like that of nationalism, implicitly encodes a Eurocentric ideology which once again posits Western politics as the central reference point for any post-colonial course of action in the present.

A parallel attempt to reconstruct history by eschewing the received, official interpretation of events is accomplished throughout *The Shadow Lines* by the narrator. The grandmother, after retiring, discovers her great uncle is still alive and living in Dhaka, in the old family house that is represented as an allegory for partition, divided fiercely between brothers up to last door-post. Her one ambition in life now is to bring him back 'home', to rescue him from his 'enemies'. She must bring him back where he belongs, which the narrator calls 'her invented country'. An inconsistency has appeared in the grandmother's rigorously nationalist discourse: though earlier she said to her grandson that once members of a nation have drawn their borders in blood, she is unconsciously identifying religion with nationality, in the peculiar conflation that characterizes nationalist spirit in India after partition. The extent to which she assigns objectivity to her imagined community becomes clear when she asks her son whether she will be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane. "... surely there is 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?" (151).

When her son explains to her that there is no reassuringly visible dividing line between the two countries, she is disconcerted:

But if there are not trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where is the difference then? And if there is 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. What was it all for then- partition and all the killing and everything- if there is not something in between? (151)

Here son points out that the barriers will become clear enough once she has to go through customs, and she will be required to state her nationality, here place of birth, etc. She suddenly becomes confused about her identity, her place of birth does not correspond to her citizenship.

The dividing lines between the two nations become even more confused as she goes to Dhaka and does not recognize the city anymore. When she arrives at her old house, she pauses in the court-yard, falling prey to nostalgia, then pulls herself up, because she feel it is "her duty now to take her uncle away from his past and thrust him in the future" (208). Since Dhaka is not India anymore, she must put him back in his proper place of belonging. But it is not simple. He is being cared after by a Muslim family. On their way back, the whole group is attacked by rioters, and Tridib, in an effort to save the old man's life, gets killed. Dhaka, an imagined place in the grandmother's memory, from the ruins of its nostalgia turns into an utterly barbaric, senseless place. One could say that the way the grandmother chooses to remember Dhaka is part of the reason why the tragedy occurs: in determining to bring back the relative to the country where he 'belongs', she acts according to a misleading picture of Dhaka which does not take into account syncretism and communalism as two sometimes converging, sometimes collision forces which have changed the city beyond all recognition.

Many years later, the narrator tries to reconstruct the tragedy. In relating this to us, he says that:

... every word I write about those events of 1964 is a product of a struggle with silence.... I know everything of this silence except that it lies outside the reach of my intelligence, beyond words... The enemy of silence is speech, but there can be no speech without words, and there can be no words without meanings, so it follows, inexorably in the manner of syllogisms, that even must loose ourselves in the silence that lies in the gap between words and the world... it is the silence of absolute, impenetrable banality. (218)

The silence was so thick that it takes the narrator fifteen years to discover that there was a connection between the riot in Dhaka and a curiously peculiar riot that the narrator experienced as a school boy in Calcutta. The narrator's father did not prevent Tridib, May and his grandmother from going to that where to trigger off the events in Dhaka and why? Because the newspaper he read did not mention it: "It was after all, a Calcutta paper, run by people who believed in the power of distance no less than I did... . How could I blame him? He was merely another victim of that seamless silence" (227).

Ghosh's narrative of the nation, hope to have shown, is determinedly aphoristic, in highlighting the uses, and at the same time, the limits of historical knowledge. It is a text that figures and is a figure of the nation. Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, about four Indian families shortly after Independence is a realistic portrayal with no visible, trace of the profound uneasiness that characterizes Ghosh's representations of India and its negotiations with modernity.

In *The Shadow Lines*, two generations of migrant woman - the grandmother and Ila - become the

figures through which different kinds of promises of nationality and migration rendered common by globalization are belied. As the narrator realizes his grandmother has nothing but contempt for freedom that could be bought for the price of an air ticket. For she too had once wanted to be free: she had dreamt of killing for her freedom- the grandmother's notion of freedom as liberty from colonial subjection, which refuses Ila's internal critics of dominant Indian patriarchal gender relations and her desire for personal freedom- also shows that for both, the source of freedom is either the nation or a migrant, metropolitan cosmopolitanism, in this contestation the meaning of freedom, Ghosh signals us to the translational and transnational space in which, as Homi Bhabha has suggested, "culture becomes a problem": this is "the point at which there is a loss of meaning in the contestation and articulation of everyday life, between classes, gender, races, nations" and generations, one might add. (134)

In the novel, neither grandmother's dreams of a middle class citizenship and national belonging nor Ila's dreams of being free of patriarchal social structures to do whatever she wants are realized. Ila escapes Robi's machismo, only to end up marrying her English childhood crush Nick Price who is unemployed and depends on her father's wealth financially, and who openly admits to her that he is unfaithful. He tells her that he is simultaneously involved with her, an Indonesian, and women from Martinique, because "he just likes a bit if variety... it is his way of travelling" (185). Treated by Nick, as an embodiment of the country she has left, she realized that the squalor of Robi's patriarchal behavior is mirrored in Nick's racial exoticization, infidelity and exploitations of her, "part too of the free world she had tried to build for herself" (187). Exoticized and objectified as racially other, desperate for the love of a man who abuses her, Ila accepts this psychic and economic violence done to her, refusing to leave him ostensibly because she loves him. Thus, Ila is unable to make either national community in India or in England- a home in the world for herself. In her desires to both- to be uncontrolled by men in the name of culture or race and to be respected as an equal- she remains minor to nationalist discourses, embodying a middle-class cosmopolitanism limited by her racial and gender difference.

Similarly, the grandmother's desire for a national community free from British subjection culminates in the failure of the middle class life she had envisioned for herself, because of the partition of 1947, now her place of birth had come to be "so easily at odds" (211) with her nationality. Separated from her home and family in Dhaka which is now in Bangladesh displaced to Calcutta through the partition that brought the post-colonial freedom she had hoped for, Tha'mma has "no home but in memory" (190). Thus she tells the narrator that Ila has no right to live in England, for she has not earned the right to be there with blood as others who had lived there over the generations. The narrator tells us:

All she wanted was a middle-class life in which, like middle-classes the world over, she would thrive believing in the unity of nationhood and territory, of self-respect and national power; that was she wanted - a modern middle-class life, a small thing, that history had denied her in its fullness and for which she could never forgive it. (77)

For Tha'mma, her alienation from her place of birth Dhaka by partition, the internal religious conflicts between "Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi" (187) that fracture the fabric of her free country, and finally, the communal violence that claimed her nephew Tridib's life in Dhaka, all embody the failure of her dream of freedom. Tha'mma's vision of freedom from colonial rule also included a vision of a national identity- citizenship that articulated a homeliness and sense of belonging. Post-colonial nationality in South Asia, riven as it was by communal hostility after partition, fails to realize the promise of national citizenship and unity. The 1947 partition not only separates Tha'mma from her childhood home, but its legacy of violence fails to replace that loss with national unity and belonging, national identity that transcends communal and regional identity. Reading, however, in both *The Circle of Reason* and *The Shadow Lines*, female marginality is intimately linked to investments in the nation form. It is precisely Tha'mma's whole hearted investment in nationality, and Ghosh's skillful depiction of its disjunction from her middle-class everyday life that becomes a powerful indictment of the politics and power of nation-states.

Thus, Ghosh has described how *The Shadow Lines* makes visible the violence of nationalism and globalization through the representation of their material and psychological abjection on women's bodies and women's lives. Thus it critiques the failures of nationalism and globalization in the lives of those who are minor subjects by their gender, class and ethnicity. It constitutes a violent critique of globalization. For Ghosh, there are no easy answers to the different kinds of violence endured by these women who leave their homes in search of newness- where that newness is variously defined as community, as material comfort, as gender equality. What Ghosh does insist on, however, is the need to critique the myths of both nationalism and globalization, and to witness their violence, which often manifests itself in the space and site of the transnational.

If Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* makes national fragmentation intelligible through its allegorization in the violence inflicted upon the masculine citizen's body, in *The Shadow Lines*, nationalism is challenged not only through the subjectivity of Tha'mma whose unrealized ideals of

national citizenship and belonging are belied, but also through the testimony of riot violence.

The Shadow Lines reveals the fragility of partition's border between nations as etched out in maps, and of the frontiers policed by nation- states that separate people, communities, and families. However, Ghosh does this not to celebrate globalization, but to argue that communities are transnational through the work of historical memory. He suggests that the nature of boundaries can be understood through the metaphor of the looking glass. The national border between the people of India and East Pakistan resembles the mirror's boundary, in which self and reflected other are the same. Therefore, in Ghosh's narrative, the borderline *can not* destroy the fundamental identity of people on both sides of the boundary, or render them changed into 'the other'. Ghosh's narrator acknowledges that initially, as he,

believed in the reality of space; I believed that distance separates, that it is a corporeal sub distance; I believed in the nations and borders; I believed that across the border there existed another reality. The only relationship my vocabulary permitted between those separate realities was war or friendship. (214)

but, as he begins to research newspaper accounts of a communal riot in Calcutta in 1962 that he remembers from his childhood, he comes to another understanding: "sitting in the air-conditioned calm of an exclusive library, I began my strangest journey: a voyage into a land outside space, an expanse without distances; a land of looking-glass events." (219) The looking-glass event he is referring to is the concurrence of communal violence into different cities in two different nations: Hindu-Muslim riots in Calcutta and in Dhaka on the same day. What becomes evident to the narrator as he researches the two distant, and mysteriously simultaneously riots is that beyond the logic of nation-states, an "indivisible sanity binds people to each other independently of their governments" (225). The narration of *The Shadow Lines* constantly shows how the subcontinent's national aspirations are belied in the everyday violence. Violence becomes both sign and testimony of the shared identity of events, memories and communities on both sides of the border.

The Shadow Lines shows how the borders of India and Pakistan become sites of violence- violence that shred communities, bloodies a common historical memory, and displaces whole population as refugees. Yet, it suggests that communal violence can also make visible the connections between and the continuity of social relations and communities that nation states seek to efface. "They had drawn their borders, believing in that pattern, in the enchantment of lines hoping perhaps that once they had etched their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other" (228) yet, in the identical temporality of the Hindu-Muslim violence in both places in which his cousin Tridib loses his life, the narrator recognizes people's common histories and shared identities. Hence he wonders:

What they felt.... When they discovered that they had created not a separation, but yet- undiscovered irony- the irony that killed Tridib: the simple fact that there had never been a moment in the 4000-year-old history of that map when the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines- so closely that I, in Calcutta, had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free- our looking-glass border. (228)

Memory then, historical memory is the force that transcends boundaries of the nation-states and unites people even in acts of corporal communal violence; ethno-religious violence in the city space reveals the continuity of community. The two cities Calcutta and Dhaka are separated from the nation they are a part of, transcending the nation-state to be united through a shared historical and cultural memory. As a result, for the narrator and his cousins Robi and Ila, a different kind of freedom- freedom from memory- becomes impossible. Robi ironically remarks:

You know, if you look at the pictures on the front pages of the newspaper at home now, all those pictures of dead people- in Assam, the north-east, Punjab, Sri Lanka, Tripura- people shot by terrorists and separatists and the army and the police, you will find somewhere behind it all that single word; everyone's doing it to be free... 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. How can anyone divide a memory? (251)

CONCLUSIONS

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* thus, claims a unique position in the post-colonial literature that explores and sometimes uncritically celebrates the hybridity of post-colonial nationality and migration. Ghosh instead points to the transnationality of community and memory through the critique of the gendered violence affected on minor bodies and minor lives by the structures and politics of both nationalism and globalization. The novel reverberate the forms of violence that nationality and globalization manifest in the home, in domestic spaces and in private lives in order to put forward in the public sphere the questions about gender, memory and belonging that South Asian nationalist history cannot answer. As such, they are interventions that urge us to re -narrate national modernity as marked by the failure of state

institutions and by the persistence of transnational memory and modes of community.

REFERENCES

Bhabha, Homi (1990). *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge P. Print.

Chatterjee, Partha (1993). *Colonialism, Nationalism and Colonized Women.* New Jercy: Princeton UP,. Print.

Dutta, P.K. (1990). *Studies in Heterogeneity: A Reading of Two Recent Indo-Anglian novels*. New Delhi: OUP,. Print.

Ghosh, Amitav (2005). *The Shadow Lines*. New Delhi: Permanent Black. Print.

Sapra, Rahul (2001). "*The Shadow Lines* and the Questioning of Nationalism." *The Fiction* of *Amitav Ghosh*. Ed. Indira Bhatt and Indira Nityanandam. New Delhi: Creative Books, pp. 57-66. Print.

Tharu, S., and K. Lalita, eds (1993). *Women writing in India: Twentieth Century* Vol. 2, Delhi: Harper Collins. Print.

Corresponding Author

Ranveer Singh*

Assistant Professor, Baba Balraj Panjab University Constituent College, Balachaur, Punjab

rchahal028@gmail.com