Cartographies of Difference: Inventing Difference in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract

The central image in Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988) is that of the "upside-down house". The "upside-down house" was a product of a notional exercise undertaken by Thamma, the narrator's grandmother, when she was a young girl. When their ancestral home was partitioned with a wall due to persistent familial disputes, the young children of the family found it difficult to cope with the now hostile environment. In response, Thamma invented stories about the portion of the house that belonged to their Jethamoshai, her father's elder brother. The stories told herein are absurd and comical, but they contain a deeper social message, as they suggest that such irrational narratives are indispensable when drawing lines and erecting walls that separate people and communities from each other. As such, the upside-down house becomes a metaphor for the consequences of the Partition that shook the Indian sub-continent in 1947, when two communities that had long co-existed suddenly found themselves on opposite sides of an arbitrarily drawn fence. Collateral to the metaphor is the intimation that, in order to sustain myths of nations and nationalism, the interested players need to concoct narratives of difference and othering. Through the image of the "upside-down house", this paper seeks to explore questions of home, nation and borders as depicted in *The Shadow Lines*.

Keywords: borders, difference, home, invention, nation, nationalism

In *The Shadow Lines*, Thamma, the narrator's grandmother, while reminiscing about her childhood home in 1/31 Jindabahar Lane, Dhaka, told him stories of an "upside-down house" (Ghosh, 2011, p. 92). In the "upside-down house" everything was inverted: "... they sleep under their beds and eat on the sheets, they cook with jhatas and sweep with their ladles, they write with umbrellas and go walking with pencils …" (p. 92). Thamma explains to the narrator that in order to amuse her younger sister Mayadebi, she made up or invented these stories about the house of their Jethamoshai, their father's elder brother. After a property dispute where the two brothers find their differences to be irreconcilable, they agree to erect a wooden wall to partition their house; this barrier is erected "through a couple of doorways" and "through a lavatory, bisecting an old commode" (p. 90). The young children of both families, unable to fully comprehend the dispute, find themselves at a loss to explain this animosity and accept new roles that take them from playmates to adversaries. This bewildering experience prompts Thamma, who was then only a young girl, to imaginatively reconstruct an alternate world where the rules of the familiar world are not applicable. Thamma imagines these differences in order to justify the presence of the wall. Jethamoshai's portion of the house becomes a symbol of the Other – inspiring fear, curiosity and humour in the two sisters.

The tale of the "upside-down house" serves as a poignant metaphor for the disastrous events surrounding the Partition of India in 1947 and the disintegration of a community that heretofore had had strong cultural coherence. The Partition, which produced two new nation states –India and Pakistan–was rationalised by amplifying the dissimilarities that are common in culturally diverse populations. In *The Shadow Lines*, the "upside-down house" is not just the consequence of the separating wall, but also the by-product of the inventive reimagining of familiar space. It challenges the idea that the Partition was an inevitable consequence of unbridgeable differences in the social, political and religious aspirations of two communities. It alternatively suggests that this difference is a fabrication and certainly not as authentic as it has been imagined. Thus, and proceeding along the conceptual lines of the metaphor, Thamma, "makes up" stories about Jethamoshai's (the "other") portion of the house.

Ghosh further raises general questions about the naturalness of the entity called "nation" by raising pertinent questions about what factors binds a nation together. Do an individual's concepts of home and belonging necessarily overlap with the idea of nation? Is it indelibly connected to one's birthplace? How stable and unchangeable are the boundaries that define a nation? Most importantly, the author offers another way of understanding the origin story of nations: the birth of a nation lays as much in the supposed shared similarities of a group of people as in the perceived unsurmountable differences that separate it from others. He goes on to suggest that in the habitual absence of these necessary differences, nations must be contrived by the imagination.

Imagining Nations

Most enquiries about the nature and origin of nations have always hinged upon the efforts to find commonalities. What binds a community of people together? Ernest Renan (2018) has methodically dismissed race, language, religion, common interests and geographical territory as factors that bind people together to form a nation. He attributes their formation to the less tangible collective memory of a heroic past and a continued consent in the present; together they compose the "spiritual principle" (p. 261) that holds that imagined community together. Ernest Gellner (1997) emphasized that it is a "shared culture" (p. 4) that may serve as the uniting principle for a nation. Gellner argues that a certain homogeneity of culture determines membership in a community and by extension in a nation. He further adds that there is a

tendency amongst all members with a similar culture to aspire to form a nation. Benedict Anderson (1983/2006) argues that it was the sense of "simultaneity" (p. 188) generated by the "technological innovations in the fields of navigation, horology and cartography mediated through print-capitalism" (p. 188) in the eighteenth century that played an important role in crystallization of the concept of the nation. For the first time, it became possible for people to imagine a community of individuals whom they would never meet in person but to whom they could feel connected. Eric Hobsbawm (2000) suggested that it was "invented traditions" (p. 13) that brought together a community of people to form a nation. The nation has been understood, then, as the product of some commonality, a common ground shared by members and a focused convergence of multiple and diverse aspirations. These commonalities may be tangible and visible or latent and elusive. It is always explained in terms of the affinity of its constituent members and their consensual desire to share a single polity.

There is a consensus among scholars attempting to define the nation and explain the phenomenon of nationalism: unlike what one sees in politically-inspired narratives regarding its ancient origins, the nation is a relatively new concept (see Renan, 2018; Anderson, 1983/2006; Gellner, 1965). Furthermore, it is not a natural phenomenon as has been unquestioningly accepted. Traditionally, having a certain nationality is considered to be as innate to the individual as are height, weight and shoe size. However, as has been elucidated by numerous scholars, there is nothing natural or essential about that political structure called nation.

The nation's origin stories are often embedded in mythic traditions that systematise a culture's untidy foundations. For the nationalists, this venerable distant past validates their claims and makes the idea of nation an indisputable truth. Nation, the nationalism it inspires and the sacrifice it often demands, all revolve around this illusion. Writing as early as 1882, Renan (2018) recognized this newness of nations when he stated that "Nations, … are something fairly new in history. Antiquity was not acquainted with them" (p. 248). Anderson (1983/2006) pointed out that this was one of the great paradoxes in the concept of nation and its attendant nationalism: the nation is objectively modern for a historian but subjectively ancient for a nationalist. This "newness" of the nation challenges the idea that nations are universal and timeless. Furthermore, it generates the idea that it is a construct and a product of historical forces and circumstances.

Anderson (1983/2006) argued that nation was a linguistic construct and had its beginning in the invention of the Gutenberg Printing Press in 1454, which significantly changed the relationship between language and religion. It made it possible to have an "imagined political community" (p. 6). He began with the idea that all religions assume that truth can be accessed through a very specific language, which is a "system of re-presentation" (p. 14) embedded in the "non-arbitrariness of the sign" (p. 14). For Christianity that language was Latin, a revered ancient foundational language that made the idea of Christendom possible. However, after the printing press was invented, there was a shift in the importance of Latin. Motivated by profit, the owners of printing presses began to print in vernacular languages. Latin was increasingly becoming an esoteric language, to be studied and researched, but not for everyday use. In contrast, publishing in vernacular languages meant that they would have a wider audience and, it follows, increased sales. He refers to this phenomenon as "print-capitalism" (p. 188) and it had a remarkable impact in the emergence of the idea of nation. It enabled a community to imagine that there were people they would never meet but whose destinies were connected to theirs in intricate ways.

The newspaper and the novel, which were legacies of the printing press, generated the concept of "homogenous empty time" (p. 26). The novels specifically were populated with characters "who may be largely unaware of one another" (p. 26) but existed simultaneously in society and moved in a fixed calendrical time for the omniscient readers. This demonstrated "the novelty of this imagined world conjured up by the author in his readers' minds" (p. 26). Anderson points out that even the simple practice of reading a newspaper created a similar sense of simultaneity through a "mass ceremony" (p. 35) where every reader is aware that his or her actions are being "replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion" (p. 35). Therefore, print culture and literary innovations as much as technological ones made it possible to become aware of a world which is not limited to the one that we are able to see and experience. This idea of having a community whose reach goes beyond the primordial village, where connections are forged without ever meeting the other members, where aspirations converge and destinies entwine, is truly a useful way to understand the notions of extended community and nation.

It discards categories like race, language, religion and culture that habitually define nations and replaces them with something more ephemeral and elusive. Anderson squarely attributes it to the power of imagination, not in the sense of fabrication or deceit but in its potential for producing novel ideas, new ways of being and existing, and discerning invisible social and psychological patterns. The point to be noted here is that, even in this new-fangled way, a nation is still imagined through links that connect the individual with others and make them fellow members of a circumscribed human collective. It is not common language, religion or race: it is shared imagination.

The recognition of the "imagined community" (p. 24) originated, according to Anderson (1983/2006), in the awareness of others performing similar kinds of ritualistic behaviour – the practice of reading a newspaper, for instance. Yet, what we also need to understand is that a nation is always imagined with boundaries. Anderson himself states that nations are always imagined as demarcated. Anderson stated that "the nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind" (1983/2006, p. 7). No matter how expansive its reach is, it cannot encompass the whole world with all human beings as its members. Rather, it is imagined with specific boundaries, which means that membership in a nation is exclusive. Its constituent members might be in constant search for commonalities, but as a group they define themselves as unlike the "others", describing these 'others' as somehow "different". Therefore, boundaries are set to determine who gets a membership and who is excluded from it. In this context, Gellner's ideas about the role of cultural affinities in forming a nation is very relevant and requires a critical examination.

Gellner (1965), dismissing the assumption that nation is natural, stated that, "Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist" (p. 168). While discussing what aids the process of the birth of a nation, he states that the creation of a nation depends on a shared culture, but he also adds that it depends on exclusive membership and on defining a difference from the others (p. 167). He states that sometimes it seems most "advantageous to set up a rival nation of one's own instead" (p. 165). To explain this, he considers two hypothetical scenarios. In the first scenario, two regions with unequal industrial and economic development but with cultural homogeneity were more likely to stay together and form a nation (p. 167). In the second scenario, Gellner argues, if the two regions are not only at different levels of economic development and prosperity but also have visible

cultural differences, whether of pigmentation, language, religious practices, then it is more likely that the impoverished region will always seek to liberate itself from the prosperous region and form its own nation (p. 167). Therefore, according to him, cultural differences can be a criterion for determining membership in a national community. The criteria for this membership vary in different scenarios; sometimes these differences may be obvious, sometimes less so and sometimes absolutely deceptive. On the whole, though, he is shedding light on a significant aspect of nation building that is focused not on similarities but on differences.

Part of the difficulty in defining a nation is that the birth of each nation is the result of a unique combination of factors and circumstances. No two nations are the result of exactly same historical events. Linguistic affinity, religious similarity, racial unity, geographical continuity, cultural resemblance, and political and economic aspirations have all been contributing factors in the creation of different states at different moments in history. There is no one reason why one factor becomes the defining feature in the formation of a nation. The world has numerous instances where culturally different people form a nation while culturally similar people form two different nations. Take the example of the Bengali-speaking community in the northeast of India. Despite sharing linguistic and cultural traits, a large part of the area was separated from India on the rationale of religious differences and made a part of Pakistan. Yet religious similarities could not keep East and West Pakistan united as one nation and the result was the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. On the other hand, India is linguistically diverse, religiously multifaceted, culturally fragmented, and yet it is conceived of as one nation.

While most considerations regarding the nature of the nation focus on any similarities found among individuals in its population, it would also be fruitful if we consider how defining differences between a community and other communities may often erect more distinct boundaries around nations. Gellner (1965) states that it always helps if "some pre-existing differentiating marks" (p.168) exist, in weaving a narrative of difference and othering. He asserts that these marks or criteria can even be "purely negative" (p. 168). For Gellner, therefore, the availability of culturally differentiating traits, whether these are the highly distinguishable traits of, race, religion, or language, is critical. He further adds that if the "differentiating marks" (p. 168) are available, then they "provide a strong incentive" (p. 170) for a population to conceive of itself as a separate nation. Therefore, membership in a national community is exclusive, arbitrary and can be denied to anybody who does not meet the required criteria. These differentiating marks also determine where the borders and the boundaries will be drawn to keep other individuals out. The question is, what happens when there are no visible differentiating markers or there are more common features tying communities than diverse features disconnecting them? What are the peculiarities, then, of the process of separating them?

Invented Differences, "Invented Countries"

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* offers an answer to this question. What happens when there are no essential or innate differences between two communities, but each ends up on the other side of the proverbial wall? The answer is in the tale of the "upside-down house": if the walls or boundaries are to be stable, then plausible differences must be devised. Nothing forges nations more rigidly than a perceived rivalry or enmity with an Other. Anderson (1983/2006) acknowledges that nationalism has "its roots in fear and hatred of the Other," (p. 141) and that Other can be racial, linguistic, religious or cultural. The boundaries drawn arbitrarily between nations serve as a constant reminder of the difference between two regions and two

communities. The novel challenges conventional ideas of nation, nationalism and the importance of borders. It examines the long-term consequences of the Partition and the communal disharmony that is its legacy. Stretched across generations and continents, it asserts that just as the borders are "shadow lines" – constructed, elusive and forever shifting, so are the differences between two communities that these borders are meant to separate. The shadowy lines conjure up images of differences for the continued relevance of the borders and the nation.

The novel is centred around the mystery of Tridib's death. The narrator brings together different threads of narratives to arrive at closure regarding Tridib's death. In many ways, Thamma unwittingly sets in motion the events that will lead to the death of Tridib. After her retirement from the school where she taught for twenty-seven years, Thamma suddenly finds herself yearning for a return "home". Initially it is mostly an imaginative journey through the narrow lanes of memory. She increasingly begins to think of her childhood in Dhaka, her old Jethamoshai and the upside-down house that resembled a honeycomb. She wistfully tells the narrator that her only regret about returning to Dhaka is that she "never got to see the upside-down house" (Ghosh 1988/2011, p. 92). She later learns that her Jethamoshai is still alive and living in their old house. Thamma, in her characteristic uncompromising way, decides that she will rescue him from "his enemies" (p.100) there and bring him to her "invented country" (p. 100) where he "belongs" (p. 100). However, going back to Dhaka wasn't just about taking a flight. It was also a homecoming – a "Coming Home", as indicated by the title of the second part of the novel. It churned a wealth of confusion and emotion in Thamma as she began to contemplate the meaning of home and its location, about borders and nationality and about whether the journey would mean "going" home or "returning" home. The most important question that she needed to settle first, however, was which place she considered "home", Calcutta or Dhaka? Thamma had unquestioningly accepted the Partition and that the consequent formation of India and Pakistan was an inescapable outcome of the religious differences. She had wholeheartedly embraced India as her nation. She wanted to "bring the old man home" (Ghosh, 1988/2011, p. 100) to Calcutta. Yet while describing her previous journeys to Dhaka she said that before the Partition she could "come home to Dhaka" (Ghosh, 1988/2011, p. 111) in a Freudian slip. This indicates that she had rationally accepted Calcutta as her "home" but could not erase the emotional ties she had with Dhaka. Thamma faced a similar anxiety about filling out her disembarkation cards when she realized that her birthplace was not a natural determinant of her nationality (Ghosh, 1988/2011). She was born in Dhaka, but her nationality was Indian, which compounded her confusion.

Just before her flight to Dhaka, she was unsettled when she realized that the border between India and East Pakistan was more bureaucratic than tangible. She was even more confounded when her son, the narrator's father, affectionately mocked her and pointed out that she would see no tell-tale signs to distinguish between India and East Pakistan in her flight to Dhaka from Calcutta. All she would be able to discern would be "green fields" (Ghosh, 1988/2011, p. 110) and there would not be any "long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other" (Ghosh, 1988/2011, p.110). This prompted her to ask the pivotal question that Ghosh had probably wanted to ask all along: "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;" (Ghosh, 1988/2011, p. 110). And if both sides were really the "same", then, "what was it all for then—Partition and all the killing and everything—if there isn't something in between?" (Ghosh, 1988/2011, p. 110). Thamma, whose ideas about nation, borders and patriotism reflect the nationalist discourse, assumed the natural and ancient origin of nations.

However, when she realized that there were no distinct differences between the two nations, she became disillusioned about the Partition and the violence that followed.

She was confronted with the fallacy of the nationalist reasoning and was able to see the futility of believing in lines and borders. This question is an evident challenge to the nationalist discourse that finds its rationale in difference and othering; they bolster the myth that the destinies of two communities are never to intersect. It also illuminates that differences need to be established in order to sustain the idea of a nation. The exercise of inventing differences was what kept the "enchantment of lines" alive (Ghosh, 1988/2011, p.169). Having drawn the lines, they believed that the two regions would now be bound in enmity forever, steadily drifting away from each other. Tridib's atlas shows the irony that often the distance between places appears more in the imaginative mindscape than in the material reality. Dhaka or Chengdu, for instance, are geographically closer to Calcutta than Srinagar is. The atlas where each country is of a different colour, separated by dark inerasable lines contains its own undoing because it is a visible reminder that the imaginative distance does not always correspond to geographical distance. The narrator recognized that the indelible lines separating countries on an atlas offered people a sense of safety, security and stability.

Thamma's journey to Dhaka was a journey in both space and in time. As she reached Dhaka, Thamma was bombarded with nostalgic images from her past, having to navigate through a city that was both familiar and unfamiliar. The "Dhaka" of her childhood memory-scape is frozen in time, but Dhaka's landscape has since changed beyond recognition. Confronted with this contradiction she clutched on to one point of fixity – the house in Jindabahar Lane, or rather her memories of it. There, in her childhood home on Jindabahar Lane, she meets a now senile Jethamoshai, locked in the prison of his own memories, refusing to acknowledge the changes wrought by the passages of time and desperately clinging to the certainty of his hatred for his brother and his family. When he is offered to be taken to India, he is absolutely puzzled by how one's nation or nationality can change according to one's convenience. He belongs to the school of thought that believes that having a nationality is a natural and essential part of one's identity, like having a name. Out of his anxiety, he says "but suppose when you get there, they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to?" (Ghosh, 1988/2011, p. 157). His distrust and rejection of "India-Shindia" (Ghosh, 1988/2011, p.157 – is a distrust for lines and boundaries and also a dismissal of "invented countries" (Ghosh, 1988/2011, p.100). For him, lines have meaning, and they are not arbitrary, but the Partition has shaken this idea. He realizes that lines can be drawn and erased according to shifts in a community's interests. The realization that one's national identity is not innate but constructed and changeable can be terribly unnerving. To cope with this, Jethamoshai refuses to move from his birthplace, which also defines his nationality. In other words, unlike Thamma, Jethamoshai rejects the justification for the Partition that determined citizenship on the basis of religion, overlooking more distinctive qualifications like birthplace. The episode of the Partition, therefore, lay bare the erroneous rationale that nation and nationality are a given and that the borders drawn are innately meaningful.

The irony is that these lines may be arbitrary, elusive, often imaginary, but they are able to inspire sacrifices and promote violence. Nation for Thamma was something one has fought or made sacrifices for. This is made evident when she decides to part with her beloved gold chain with a tiny ruby pendant during the 1965 Indo-Pak War. When the narrator enquires about it, she becomes hysterical and screams: "I gave it to the fund for the war. I had to; don't you see? For your sake; for your freedom. We have to kill them before they kill us; we have to wipe them out" (Ghosh, 1988/2011, p. 172). The binary between "we" and "them" is easily

discernible and it is an expression of paranoia and fear about the Other. This fear is not entirely unjustified, as this sacrifice takes place only a bit after she witnessed a violent mob brutally murder her Jethamoshai and her nephew Tridib in 1964. She no longer associates her birthplace as the source of her nationality. The violence that she witnessed on that fateful day convinced her that nation and nationality had to be earned with blood and sacrifice. The border has transformed in her eyes. It is what keeps them safe, largely by restricting the violence at the periphery of the nation. The violence inflicted by one community on another helps consolidate the national boundaries. Linguistic, religious, racial affinities become overshadowed by memories of war, violence and bloodshed. In Thamma's words, once they witness the violence "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" (Ghosh, 1988/2011, p. 58). This is what determines the membership in a nation: "they know they are a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood" (Ghosh, 1988/2011, p. 58). In the words of Kaul (1994), this kind of violence is indispensable in nation-building, as it "ratifies boundaries and deepens the ideological and inter-national oppositions necessary to mould an internally-coherent national identity" (p. 136). So, it is not similarity, commonality, shared ideas that bind a nation together, it is the identification and even the concoction of difference and the violence born out of that difference that creates nations. Like all births, the birth of a nation is also written in blood, pain and trauma and is sustained by a collective, repetitive remembering of the pain.

Conclusion

Towards the end of 1963, when Thamma decides to go to Dhaka one last time, little does she realize that all her certainties about home, nation and borders will be shattered and entirely redefined by the journey. Most frequently, in order to create a semblance of stability in a constantly shifting world we create an illusion and a myth – that one's connection to one's birthplace is inextricable, that the birthplace determines the location of one's home and national identity, and that nation is demarcated by the magical lines that have been there since time immemorial. The novel dismantles these myths and suggests that they cannot be considered universal truths. Home is connoted by one's birthplace, but it is not limited by it: one's nationality has nothing to do with one's birthplace, boundaries are forever shifting and changing, and nations are often the creation of an imaginative exercise that depends as much on differences as on similarities. The novel further illustrates that though the differences may be invented, and the lines that represent the differences shadowy, they have the potential to generate a violence that transcends all lines and boundaries, blurring them and creating irreversible adhesions to imaginary communities.

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