|| Journal of ELT and Education || JEE-*2*(2), June-2019, Page: 10-18
ISSN (Print): 2618-1290, ISSN (Online): 2663-1482, ISSN-L: 2618-1290

Reading *The Shadow Lines* as a Critique of Statism

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[**Citation:** Imran, K. & Islam, M. N. (2019). Reading *The Shadow Lines* as a Critique of Statism. *Journal of ELT and Education*, *2*(2)**:** 10-18.]

RECORDS:

Received:
28.03.2019

Revised:
19.04.2019

Accepted:
28.05.2019

Published:
28.05.2019

Abstract

Despite constant deliberation, The Shadow Lines by Amitav Ghosh is now considered a modern classic due to its certain merit. This study has identified that the novel primarily criticizes the concept of statism, a resurrected term, whereas the existing literature, for more than three decades, were dominated by the criticism of nationalism. The study argues that certainly the novel tirelessly criticizes nationalism as well as statism, but criticism of the former was seen by many, whereas criticism of the latter seemed to be overlooked. The study first briefly outlines what statism is. Then a selected literature on the novel as a criticism of nationalism is preceded by a comparison of statism and nationalism. The study compares these two concepts both on their functions and then on how nationalism and statism view sub-national components, borders, and freedom and sovereignty. The final section discusses four sectors in which Amitav Ghosh criticized statism throughout the novel The Shadow Lines: the unique function of state of creation of 'others', state's view on sub-national components, borders, freedom as well as on sovereignty.

Keywords: *Statism, nationalism, sub-national components, freedom, sovereignty*

> *"WHERE the mind is without fear and the head is held high;*
> *Where knowledge is free;*
> *Where the world has not been broken up into fragments*
> *By narrow domestic walls;"* (Tagore, 1920: 31)

Envisioning a world without fear and a country without borders-conflicts, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), Asia's first Nobel laureate, wrote the above-mentioned lines in his *Song Offerings.* Against the same backdrop, a bulk of literature has been written in Indian subcontinent in times since the partition of 1947. Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is a wonderful such work; a powerful historical novel set in Calcutta, Delhi, Dhaka and London, centering around thirty years of happenings and memories. Written in formative style, the novel not only investigates the root(s) of conflicts, riots and war in newly emerged post-

colonial nation-states but also questions the concept of 'nation' and 'nationalism'. Terming national borders as fragile and unreal, *The Shadow Lines* does not limit itself in critiquing only 'nationalism', rather the text goes deeper into questioning the idea of 'statism'; nature, functions and goals of a state. Though a handsome body of work has focused on the novel as a sharp criticism of nationalism, there is little work available to see *The Shadow Lines* as a deeper criticism of 'statism'. Keeping this objective in mind, this paper attempts to explore how *The Shadow Lines* is primarily a critique of 'statism'. This paper has discussed four areas to meet its objective. They are (a) Understanding Statism, (b) Statism and Nationalism: A Comparison, (c) Criticism of Nationalism in *The Shadow Lines* and (d) Critiquing Statism in *The Shadow Lines*.

Statism, as Alexander Moseley defined, is "the collection of proposals that presume the need of a state to control and direct a proportion of the economy's wealth for political ends and the actions of the people for moral ends" (Moseley, 2016: 3). Essentially, statism is a proposal that had been triumphant over other proposals like feudalism or monarchism when 'serving the people' is in question. In other words, state apparently serves people better than a system in which the lord controls and owns all. Despite having fundamental differences, both liberalism and socialism believe that state is necessary to govern people. In fact, most of the ideologies that are currently in practice by political communities or in discussion within academia are statist. It is rightly said, "statism is the present dominant ideology for most political communities" (Moseley, 2016: 6). Statists argue that state is necessary to avail two 'ends'—political and moral. The political end is to control and direct a proportion of the economy's wealth. Political end may widely vary in terms of practice and nature. When wealth is in concern, realists and mercantilists, though not exclusively, argue and "emphasis on wealth as a critical component of national power" (Oatley, 2015: 9). Socialist idealism, on the other hand, advocates equal income and an egalitarian society dedicated to ensuring equal distribution of wealth. Libertarians champion the thought of self-ownership, directly opposing socialist project of state for creating homogenous population with income and wealth equality. Libertarians argue that state or any kind of permanent authority will surely undermine the self-ownership and individual freedom of people. But having a fear of social and moral disruption, the libertarians also suggest a minimal but not an omnipotent state—a state that will be functional only when there is an emergency.

Yet, complexities lay within moral question because first, statists argue that state serves betterment for majority of the people. State aims to ensure happiness for most of the people, even if some are destined to suffer. Secondly, state wants to build virtuous citizens and cultivates arguably the best qualities of men and women. Thirdly, state imposes duties upon general people; tell them what to do and what not to. Statists, irrespective of their variations, imply that common man should be directed or controlled by an authority. Many argue that men are morally weak, either by nature or nurture. Without any kind of authority in society, man's natural weakness will result into disastrous effect. Even though the liberals and libertarians advocate utmost human freedom, they cannot refute the moral urge of an authority. Only anarchists question the necessity of the state.

Systematic study on nationalism started effectively from late nineteenth century. Ernest Renan pointed out fragility of components related to 'nation' and 'nationalism'. He asked, "How is that Switzerland, which has three languages, two religions, and three or four races, is a nation, when Tuscany, which is so homogeneous, is not one?" (Renan, 1990: 12). Anderson (1991) claimed that nationalism is simply an imagined concept. He explained that "nations were not the determinate product of given sociological condition such as language or

race or religion; they had been, in Europe and everywhere else in the world, imagined into existence" (Chatterjee, 1996: 216). Nationalism is more psychological than physical. A group of people perceives themselves belonging to a same community over some symbols, practices, ideas and historical or mythical narratives but an individual of the nation will never personally know all other members. Yet, they cherish an imagined image of the community without any real acquaintance.

It is evident that in contemporary study often state and nation are used synonymously. As Weber (1970) said, "There is scarcely any task that some political association has not taken in hand, and there is no task that one could say has always been exclusive and peculiar to those associations which are designated as political ones" (Weber, 1970: 77). Nevertheless, there are some remarkable differences though neither exclusive nor limited between these two ideals. Nationalism assures identity, motivates people and provides a guideline on how national culture will be defined. It can be viewed as glue to some of the statists; glue that binds the populace with each other by creating a common identity that in turn serves the existence and endurance of a state. In other words, "nationalism became a substitute for social cohesion through a national church, royal family or other cohesive traditions, or collective group self-representation, a new secular religion" (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983: 303). Statism, on the other hand, does the same functions along with many others. When mobilization of mass population is necessary, nationalism complements state. State is an institution that holds the authority and undertakes administrative and legal orders. In time, states evolve and adopt newer technologies, ideas and forms of administration in performing its functions.

Secondly, some statists consider nationalism a potential threat to state's integration. Academics and statesmen alike undermine the cohesive force of nationalism and characterized it not only harmful but also outdated for this century. The rationale behind this is that ethnic and minority groups may greatly hamper the integrity of state by starting their own nationalist movement in the name of self-determination. Statists, for this reason, advocate unconditional religious, ethnic, linguistic assimilation forgetting differences.

Thirdly, statism and nationalism view territory and boundary differently. Nationalism views the right over the territory of a nation as a basic right. The authority of controlling certain territory by a certain nation is a result of historical legacy or cultural right of the nation (Stilz, 2011). Thus, the identity of one nation becomes intertwined with territory (Miller, 1995). On the contrary, Statism views territory as a more materialistic and a legal thing opposed to an abstract form viewed by the nationalists. State claims three legal right on the territory it controls: a) rights of territorial jurisdiction b) rights to control resources c) rights to control borders (Miller, 2012). Individuals, groups and institutions, as part of the state, hold the right of territory and border.

Finally, statism does not perceive sovereignty as perceived by nationalism. Although Greenfield identified nation as "a unique *sovereign* people" (Greenfeld, 1992: 08), a considerable number of nations are not sovereign in the general sense. Modern notion of sovereignty is irrevocably combined with state. Sovereignty is an inherent attribute exercised by modern states. The notion of state sovereignty holds that no other entity will influence or control the decision making of a state. Alternatively, a second notion of sovereignty lies within the principle of separation of power in government. The principle posits that an apparatus or branch of government will not interfere with the functions of others. Such a system is inherent in most of the modern states, at least constitutionally and thus self-evidently declares the sovereignty of state.

Till date, several critical essays and articles have been written which examined various aspects of the novel; narrative techniques, character sketches and historical analysis. However, this section will read Ghosh's novel as a critique of nationalism. Roy (2010) identifies two different point of views towards nationalism: one is *Tha'mma*'s- a stubborn militant nationalism born out of India's long and bloody nationalist movement, the other is the unnamed protagonist's- that necessitates to redefine nationalism in the present global context. She wrote, "Ghosh indeed questions whether nations can be geo-politically defined at all as he shows in *The Shadow Lines*, the borders that are supposed to divide nations are often shadowy, arbitrary and illusive" (Roy, 2010: 120). Manzoor (2012) views *The Shadow Lines* essentially an examination of lives in post-colonial context torn apart by the effects of nationalism in sub-national level. He tried to reconstruct a new concept of nationalism which is characteristically familial, cultural and geographical that runs parallel to religious and communal complexities. This unique notion of identity transcends borders, space, race and age. At the end of his novel, Ghosh asks the characters to completely abandon their differences, specially the differences created by nationalism, and relish the life of transcendence of "…present and past, self and image, colonizer and colonized" (Manzoor, 2012: 52).

Again, one's nationality is not biologically defined. That means nationality is not constant and subjected to change upon a person's socio-political context. On the other hand, people view nationalism differently based on their own personal belief or ideological leanings. The illusion nationalism creates within peoples' mind is well projected through Kumar's (2008) analysis of *Tha'mma* in *The Shadow Lines.* Her well-rooted militant nationalism is continuously questioned by her odd identity carried out by her birthplace. Kumar (2008) argues, "the nation is crucial to the conceptualization, scope and structure of *The Shadow Lines*, somewhere along the way it becomes an elusive and shadowy entity, as the principal protagonist in the drama are unable to make sense of its resonant contradictions" (68). Furthermore, nationalism often does accelerate, facilitate and raise peoples' hope for freedom. The August of 1947 brought about a surge of aspiration and expectations throughout India that the old order had finally ended. But instead of creating integration and a perfect new order, independence summoned hatred and continued animosity in the political practices of the heterogeneous country resulted into displacement, dispossession and communal violence within and beyond the country and split individual and national identities. Neogy (2008) argues that freedom was comprehended differently to different people and it was projected throughout the novel. She questions whether the so called 'freedom', resultant to the long nationalist movements that has brought about immense miseries to millions of people at the end can be labeled as freedom or not.

Malhotra's (2008) essay 'Nationalism and the question of freedom in *The Shadow Lines*' pointed out that nationalism has been criticized from the perspective of globalism in the novel. The characters in the novel continuously find their own identity at odds with nationalism. *Tha'mma* is undoubtedly a militant nationalist, and thus past-driven. She got her nationalism from past anti-colonial struggles. Ila's own identity is not backward looking, but her identity is continuously shaped by modern cosmopolitanism. The narrator identifies the numerous borders crisscrossing our lives as a resultant of nationalism and his idea of freedom can be realized if the idea of nationalism can be surpassed. Even the concept, 'nationalism' can also be analyzed as a spatial notion. Chambers (2011) viewed *The Shadow Lines* as the author's criticism of western conception of space. She argued that the notion of space is subtly 'almost-always' present within the core of the novel. Maps and nations both are

Western constructs to describe space that disrupted millions of lives in Indian subcontinent before, during and after 1947, as evidentially represented throughout the novel.

Though after 1947, Indian Anglophone literature largely accepted nationalism as evident in the writings of Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan, yet from early eighties, Indian Anglophone literature started scrutinizing, questioning and even rejecting nationalism. Majumdar (2011) identifies *The Shadow Lines* as a stark pioneering critique of nationalism belonging to the latter group. Ghosh's criticism of the lines that demarcate nations not only divide people territorially, but also separate them by creating numerous shadowy lines within their desire, imagination, reality and memory. The toll that every individual must take caused by this artifice of division- nation- is so immense that it questions the validity of arbitrary division of people without considering their reality and memory.

While talking about 'shadow lines' as a concept, the writer Amitav Ghosh in conversation with Kumar (2007) explains:

> "[T]he classical, nineteenth-century ideology of the nation state has essentially been eroded at two levels. One, it is eroded at the top, where the rich nations have essentially begun to melt into each other. We see this clearly with the EU……It has also melted away at the bottom where, in some way, if you travel now between so many parts of, say, Burma, Thailand and India, there really are no borders, it's completely porous……..So it melted away at two levels". (102)

This statement of the writer has propelled the authors of the paper to engage in thinking of and reading the novel critically to see how it overshoots nationalism to hit the core of the concept of the statism itself. Roy (2010) identifies four ways of reading *The Shadow Lines.* Firstly, it is just a coming-of-age story of the unnamed protagonist still haunted by the sad death of his beloved uncle in an across-the-border. Secondly, the novel is all about Partition and communal violence. Thirdly, it questions the creation of nation-states- a creation which is done by drawing arbitrary boundaries between people. This illusive and arbitrary boundary originates immense miseries to the lives of people dwelling both sides of the boundary and *The Shadow Lines* is the tale of those miseries. Finally, Ghosh's novel is a tale of unearthed forgotten history- a riot in 1964 which was suppressed by the popularized history of Indian Subcontinent. Drawing out from the third one, the authors have explored the four areas of *The Shadow Lines* in which Amitav Ghosh criticized statism. These four are: the function of state of creation of 'others', state's view on sub-national components, on borders, on freedom and on sovereignty.

A crucial function of a state has been criticized in *The Shadow Lines*; that is- ensuring the existence and endurance of state by imposing a set of values and thus creating otherness. Conjuring the idea of *Us* and *Them* and 'protecting' own people from the harsh actions of *Them,* statists had long since endured their instrument of control. As Moseley identifies, "The common statist thesis is that the actuality of fear or danger– or its implied or potential threat– in the absence of government drives men to form a protective agency to secure their lives and liberty" (Moseley, 2006: 16). For example, *Tha'mma's* account of her ancestral home in Jindabahar Lane, Dhaka, allegorically depicts this design of the statists. The description of the house is full of symbolism: an interesting house slowly growing like a honeycomb by generation of *Boses* (*Tha'mma's* maternal ancestors) with multiple layers and extensions. However, problem aroused after the death of *Tha'mma's* grandfather, the stern patriarch of the house. Her father and Jethamoshai (her father's elder brother) engaged into quarrel on trivialities which eventually led the two families into literal division by a wooden

partition wall. As *Tha'mma* narrates, "When the wall was eventually built, they found that it had ploughed right through a couple of doorways so that no one could get through them anymore; it had also gone through a lavatory, bisecting an old commode (Ghosh, 1992: 123). Chambers (2011) identifies that the old house of Jindabahar lane was an allegory of India, a country where over the time different groups of people of different color, creed and caste have joined and lived together. But the partition and the border line whimsically divided families and their ancestral homes. Not only that, to frighten her little sister, who did not have the memory of the family other side, the young *Tha'mma* conjured a peculiar depiction of the other side of the wall:

> "Everything's upside-down over there, I'd tell her; at their meals they start with the sweets and end with the dal, their books go backwards and end at the beginning, 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 …….. If you don't go to sleep right this very minute I'll drop you over the courtyard wall, and then you'll have to become upside-down too" (Ghosh, 1992: 125-126).

This fantasization mimics the partition of India and Pakistan. Chambers (2011) argues that we generally consider our state as normal and imagine the strangeness of other states. The construction of wall forced people to demonize the people behind the wall, the 'others'. This 'otherness' and 'strangeness' is an important tool in hand of the statists and utilizing this tool, most of the statists ensure the endurance of their state. As discussed earlier, statists tend to mold public perception towards the creation of otherness and they justify their deeds by saying that "government…should impose a set of values upon people different from what they themselves would freely choose: because the state's officials know better" (Moseley, 2016: 5).

About the making of a nation, *Tha'mma* believes that a nation can be formed through war and bloodshed and be united through the memory of this bloodshed. To her view:

> "It took those people a long time to build that country [England]; hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood……They know they're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood. …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… (Ghosh, 1992: 78)

Tha'mma's idea of nationalism has two faces; first, nationalism is not a privilege- it is a hard-earned right earned through sacrifice, blood and war; secondly a highlighted national identity buries all other identities (religious, cultural and ethnic) of individuals and thus consolidates the national bond. This second aspect carries a heavy notion of statism. There is no doubt that the passage carries out *Tha'mma's* own understanding of nationalism, but this second aspect makes us aware that she is concerned about people's different identity. Statists, as mentioned earlier, advocate unconditional assimilation of people forgetting their own petty differences. Later, Ghosh (1992) criticized statist doctrine of assimilating different identities through Robi's passionate semi-soliloquy. In that speech, Robi recalled his realization as a district officer when day after day he used to look at the pictures of dead bodies published in the newspapers, shot by terrorists, separatists or armed forces personnel from "Assam, the northeast, Punjab, Sri Lanka, Tripura" (247). He realized that to protect the country's unity and freedom, he would have to perform his own duty: order his policemen to kill the terrorists

and even kill the whole village if necessary. Ironically, the terrorists would have done the same to him for their own freedom. From different stand-points, freedom is thus perceived differently and to Robi's realization, this kind of freedom is utterly impossible. He asks, "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?" (247)

The greatest blow towards statism has come from the novel's perception of borders and territories. In fact, Amitav Ghosh himself has questioned borders in an interview saying:

> "What interested me first about borders was their arbitrariness, their constructedness—the ways in which they are naturalized by modern political mythmaking. …….I think these lines are drawn in order to manipulate our ways of thought: that is why they must be disregarded" (Hawley, 2005: 8-9).

While planning for flying to Dhaka (part of the then East Pakistan), *Tha'mma* was wondering how the border looked like. Will she be able to see the visible border, divided by trenches, gun-pointing soldiers and barren lands from high above the ground? But in her disappointment, her son explained that there is nothing like that in the border. An absence of any visible mark between two countries, like in a map bisected by dark lines, made her perplexed and forces her to ask:

> "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: it'll 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 isn't something in between?" (Ghosh, 1992: 151).

Later, she became unusually nervous when she came to know that at Dhaka airport, she might have to answer questions like her nationality, date of birth, place of birth etc. Suddenly she realized "how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality" (Ghosh, 151). When Tha'mma and her entourage went to Dhaka and met her Jethamoshai and insisted upon his shifting to Calcutta, the old man gave a very realistic picture of border erection. He lived most of his life and understood the futility of arbitrary lines erected by the statists and thus given his final verdict, "As for me, I was born here, and I will die here" (Ghosh, 215). He utters:

> "I don't believe in this India-Shindia. It is all very well, you are going away now, but suppose when you get here they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere". (Ghosh, 1992: 215)

An urge for freedom and sovereignty had always been an essential and effective slogan for the leaders of every nationalist movement. Thus, *Tha'mma* was too highly motivated by Indian nationalist movement. That time she wanted to be a part of nationalist movement by being a member of a secret terrorist society like *Anushilan* and *Jugantar*. For the sake of freedom, if she would have to kill an English magistrate, she confessed to the protagonist that she would have done that- "…yes, I would have killed him. It was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free" (Ghosh, 37). Moreover, during the 1965 Indo-Pak war, the narrator found that she had sold her last bit of jewelry. When asked about that, she screamed, "I gave it away…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;" (Ghosh, 237).

Tha'mma's concept of freedom is essentially nationalist as well as statist which contradicts with Ila, her niece's concept of cosmopolitanism. Once when Robi advised Ila not to dance with the strangers in Bar, she shouted, "do you see now why I've chosen to live in London? …It's only because I want to be free. …Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you" (Ghosh, 88). In criticism of Ila's concept of freedom, *Tha'mma* asserts that Ila's version is not true freedom rather it is mad desire. To *Tha'mma*, such kind of freedom is well founded in the West-"that's what those places have to offer. But that is not what it means to be free" (Ghosh, 89). There are little differences between both the women's concept of freedom. Because *Tha'mma's* concept of liberty is, like Ila's, based on Hobbesian notion of freedom from external restraints (in her case, freedom from colonial rule)' (Chambers, 2011). Ghosh (1992) criticizes *Thamma's* concept of freedom through Robi's passionate speech discussed earlier. Additionally, he perhaps advocates a kind of bondage contrary to external restraints like freedom of people and state sovereignty championed by statism. Through the protagonist, he said that freedom and ultimate happiness lay within 'bondage' of a person with his or her community. As the protagonist states:

> "[A]nd 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 clamour of the voices within me" (Ghosh, 1992: 89)

The waning sovereignty of nation-states, largely due to the growth of supranational bodies and sweeping globalization in the previous century, has made some commentators, analysts and academicians speculate the vanishing of the century's old institution, state, into oblivion. But at the backdrop of Islamic fundamentalism, white supremeacism, populism and economic protectionism, the institution has come back with flying colors and this decade has been proven as the decade of reincarnated nation-states so far. Most of the people have to come into a Faustian agreement with the most encompassing agent of violence (i.e., state; even the much-applauded welfare states maintain a monopoly of force and violence by imposing tax and punitive measures on its subjects) largely because they have no better functional arrangement other than this one. Why does state then, even if it is a proven agent with monopoly of violence, still persist and likely to be persistent in the coming decades? One of the reasons is- those who should have tried to find out a better alternative, or most importantly should have questioned the existence of state, did not do their jobs properly. Amitav Ghosh is then a rarity, because even though he does not provide us any solution, he asked and criticized the existence of state and statism, from a plethora of viewpoints: the unique function of state of creation of 'others', state's view on sub-national components, state's view on borders, and states view on freedom and sovereignty throughout *The Shadow Lines.*

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