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Postcoloniality versus Nationality in the Novels of Amitav Ghosh and Upamanyu Chatterjee

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Postcoloniality as a discourse itself forbears the undercurrent wave of national sentiment. Nationalism as necessity for integration obviously questions on the validity of postcolonial ideology. Hence, the writers of a nation once dominated by the colonial regime more or less are fraught with the parallel sentiments and they devise the methods of their own to explicate their ideas through writing literary texts. The intensity of the issues varies according to the temporal conditions under which their own subjectivities flourish. If we trace the literature of colonial period of India we find it quite dissimilar to the literature produced in the immediate post independent India or the recent past of the eighties and nineties. The literature of colonial period is ardently emulated in nationalistic attitude, and is a kind of voice seeking integration to throw out the colonial power. Seemingly, these literatures are considered more sentimental to the idea of nationalism. In comparison, the literature of the recent postcolonial period is celebrative in nature rejoicing the freedom. But gradual transformation through the last few decades evidently brings the conglomeration of cultures, outlooks, individuals and social stances. The robust impact of the colonial ideologies irresistibly transgresses into the psyche of the people. However, according to Ania Loomba, the impact of colonization is very feeble among the people living in the bottom line. She says: "The term 'postcolonial' does not apply to those at the bottom end of this hierarchy, who are still 'at the far economic margins of the nation-state' so that nothing is 'poor' about their colonization" (Loomba13). Hence, the term exclusively implies about the existence of its ideologies among the elites and middle class people of once colonized nation. Again, the idea of nationality is modulated by the influencing groups in a state/nation where the issue of subjugation, deprivation, domination is intensely weaved within the complex matrices. Here also the idea of nationalism is fostered and propagated as promoted by the leading visionary of a nation/state. Although both the ideologies significantly guide the psychic operation of the postcolonial subjects the guiding spirit is triggered by the intellectual, educated and more privileged class because the bottom line subjects doubt their own capacity to overthrow the irresistible interference of powerful ideologies of the colonizers.

The novels of Amitav Ghosh and Upamanyu Chatterjee revolve around this two opposing sentiments battling for supremacy. The polity of power dynamics, the sentiments of nationality and the sensibilities of own glorious tradition jostle along the liminal positions of postcoloniality. However, the narratives of Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and Chatterjee's *English, August: An Indian Story* (1988) offer an opportunity to the readers to consider its configurations and pace based on variegated refractions and inferences through its multilayered elite and middle class characters, themes, events and landscapes. Instead of dictating their authoritative manipulations the readers have to establish their own judgments.

The Shadow Lines is a transnational novel representing both colonizer and colonized subjects of three generations family tree spanning between colonial and postcolonial temporalities. The recurrent themes of border crossing, assimilation, acculturation and divergent sentiments raise its adequate question on the existence of a discrete nation. But the undercurrent moves of national sentiments rooted in crisis, war, riots and cultural consciousness deliberately combat against such convictions. Ghosh wants to universalize the crisis of a nation irrespective of its time and space. If there is devastating war in England, it reinforces its existence in India as well through the reference to Indo-China war of the sixties. Again, the riot of Dhaka is recapitulated with its repercussions in Calcutta and Kashmir in India.

The characters of *The Shadow Lines* can be divided into three categories, i.e. colonizers group – (Lionel treswasen and his grandson Nick Price), colonized group – (Datta Chouduri and his son, Himangshu Shekhar and Jatin), and singularly hybridized category – Ila. Amidst them, the nationalist group are – the narrator's Tha'mma and Robi and non-conformist to the either – the narrator, Tridib and May. The novel presents the gruesome realties of postcolonial India remarkably at two levels. The political reality characterized by the crisis of war, riots, secessionism in one hand, and the ideological confrontation between indigenous and colonial hegemony. Thus the question of nationalism reiterated against the throttling European ideologies is recurrently reverberated through events, characters and dialogues. The postcolonial identity of the nation, society and self faces the raging challenge at the irresistible legacy of immediate past of Eurocentricism.

The character of Ila is a hybridized character as she is grown up in different locations of European nations and elsewhere. She develops her own belief system unlike the Indian imagination rooted in typical Hinduistic cultural idiom. Her cultural disintegration and crippling identity rejects the age old tradition of India so deeply embedded in her true belongingness to this nation. She defies the demarcation of cultural codes generally ascribed in Indian women's destiny that glorifies the mythical Sita and Savitri. When the narrator and Robi went to Ila's house situated at Elgin Road, the description of Ila is beautifully presented: "She looked younger with her hair cut, boyish in a way, and she was thinner too, her arms were like wands, and the dimple was never quite gone from her cheek. She looked improbably exotic to me, dressed in a faded blue jeans and a T-shirt- like no other girl I had ever seen before except in pictures in American magazines" (*TSL* 81). She is completely under the spell of colonial power. Since childhood, her attempt to become 'like the colonizer' leaves her neither as colonizer nor as the sheer

native 'subject'. She becomes what Homi K Bhabha terms, as a 'hybrid' character. She undergoes pollination process to adopt herself into that inter-terrestrial state. The process of hybridization is slow and undercurrent but progresses with a compelling impact. She loses her native subjectivity and emerges as new hybrid one of the period. The novelist beautifully presents a picture of Ila as representative of how a childhood or juvenile mind is so brittle to submit to the strong 'colonial desire.'

The characters of the narrator and Robi who are complementary to each other are devoid of resoluteness though there is pressing allurement towards the colonial desire in the form of Ila in case of the narrator and May in case of Tridib. Both the characters are potential enough to contribute for the narrative of Indian nationalism. But nowhere in the novel do they display their intention or likeness for the same. The only object of desire for the narrator is to accomplish his destination in Ila as she ideologically and culturally belongs to the colonial prototype. Tridib, in the same vein remains life-long pursuant of May, the White 'other' till his premature death in Dhaka in the hands of fanatic and irrational fundamentalists. The second generation characters such as – Jatin Datta-Chaudhuri and Himangshu Shekhar Datta Choudhuri, Maya Debi and Victoria lack the consciousness of genuine national identity as they are completely engrossed into their transnational moorings. Their attitudes, life-style and dress codes thrust them further from the national identity of similitude and semblance. They are better identified as transnational rather than national in their transformed apocalypse though their root is deeply connected with the soil of the nation. Despite they share the opinion of the intellectual elites their modes and perspectives they actually transcends beyond the idea of nationalism.

Against such tottering sentiments of nationalism at the rapid influence of postcolonial ideologies, Ghosh tries to maintain balance between the two opposing forces by portraying three important characters – Tha'mma, her Jethamosai and Robi. Even though the sentiments of these very nationalistic characters are germane to the very core of their heart and psyche, they unfortunately do not belong to the influential and powerful intellectuals like the Datta Choudhuris of the second generation. Their opinions, attitudes, sentiments and love for the nation with all the affiliations fail to dismantle the postcolonial ideologies so forcibly penetrated into the Indian psyche. Robi is the descendent of elite group but his immaturity in opinion, age and singularity is vanquished to submit before the ideologically distempered Indian nationality that are already immersed headlong under the impression of postcoloniality.

The reciprocal influence of the colonizer and colonized to gain their ultimate identity is well expressed in Homi K. Bhabha's seminal text *The Location of Culture* (1994) that beautifully substantiates the context of this novel. Bhabha says:

> It becomes crucial to distinguish between semblance and similitude of the symbols across diverse cultural experiences – literature, art, music, ritual life, death – and the social specificity of each of these productions of meaning as they circulate as signs within specific contextual locations and social systems of value. The transnational dimension of cultural transformation – migration, diaspora, displacement, relocation – makes

> the process of cultural translation a complex form of signification. The natural(ized) unifying discourse of nation, peoples, or authentic folk tradition, those embedded myths of cultures particularity, cannot be readily referenced. The great, though unsettling, advantage of this position is that it makes you increasingly aware of the construction of culture and the invention of tradition. (Bhabha 247)

The contextualized translation of cultural and ideological signification of Ila is apparent. She acclimatizes the spontaneously naturalized issues of nation, place, people and tradition. Though Ila's root can be traced to India, her transformation is obvious as Bhabha points out at the raging cultural clashes with the western. She is influenced but Nick. He is the 'colonial desire' whom she must sacrifice herself. But unfortunately she fails to influence the opposite 'other'. She reconstructs herself as hybridized being without reciprocating it to other.

Ila's life is vibrant, colourful and self-contented. In terms of her love life or ultimate marriage throws light on her frankness. It is the culture, people and place around which she has grown up with. Though the roots are spread to India, there is not much attachment with the socio-cultural ethos of India. It is given full length freedom by her parents who do not find any reason to prevent her from choosing a life partner alien to her society, culture or language.

In contrast, Robi, though shares blood relations in the family, the cultural ethos they bear with distinctive features they have fostered throughout their maturation process in different cultures and locations. Ila has grown up outside India, while the narrator has never been outside of it and Robi has partly grown up abroad and partly in India. However, Robi is the epitome of traditional Indian adolescent despite his childhood in abroad. He is the person who upholds the value of cultural idiom nurtured so far. He is the representative of true heir of Indian national imagination and sentiments. When Ila utterly displeased sought explanation for preventing her from dancing with the stranger, he says: "Girls don't behave like that here ... You can do what you like in England… But here there are certain things you cannot do. That's our culture; that's how we live" (*TSL* 88). His character resembles to that of Tha'mma who has special admiration for his cultural values.

A major critic on Ghosh Anshuman A. Mondal rightly says: "*The Shadow Lines* probably represents Ghosh's most direct confrontation with nationalism and national identity" (Mondal 87). However, Ghosh problematizes the issue of nationalism by unsurpassingly intermingling the nationality and transnationality features of Tha'mma and Jethamosai for they display their arbitrary opinion irrespective of their root or place of origin. She is fascinated by the heroism of that boy whom she regards as the follower of great fighters like Khudiram Bose and the Bagha Jatin who lost their lives in the revolt against the British. She is so inspired that she would be happy to assist them – in cooking food, washing clothes or anything like that. The boy's image is so enthusiastic that she is ready to take any challenge against that colonial regimen: "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" (*TSL* 39).

Tha'mma who almost wanted to join the rebel of Anushillan and Jugantar of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in her college days for her country, shifts the sentiments of her nationality as soon as she starts believing India as her home after long years of life spent here. She no more considers East Pakistan as her home. She accepts herself as true follower of Indian nationalism. Her sentiments for the nation belonged to East Pakistan till she lived there. But her new place of habitation i.e. India becomes the centre of outpouring her national sentiments and forgets that once she had been ardent follower of East Pakistan's nationalism.

Tha'mma witnesses the movements, riots, police raids in her adolescent life. Along such social upheaval, her adolescent mind frequently was immersed into the tempo of that time. The boy, Tha'mma's classmate, is the representative of another youth of that turmoil period. Besides, Tha'mma is ready to go to any extent for the cause of political freedom. During Indo-China war of 1960s she is so excited and impatient that she wants to teach the Chinese a good lesson. She is even ready to sacrifice her golden ornaments for the greater purpose of the war.

Nevertheless, Ghosh very complicatedly raises the question on the existence of national identity like Benedict Anderson's 'Imagined Communities' because his characters do not belong to a particular country permanently. They seek to assert their national identity according to their movement to particular space. Ila defies her belonging-ness to India and its culture though she is daughter of this soil. Her momentary movement to the west reconstructs her own idea of nation. More significantly, Tha'mma's early craze for the freedom of East Pakistan is questioned by her later stance as a nationalist in India. So, the concept of Anderson is acute mode to define her position because the idea of her nation is not surrounded by borders but constructed within her mind. When she went to Dhaka she wanted to verify the border from the plane that should divide India and Bangladesh into two different land masses. She believed that "there's something – trenches perhaps, or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren stripes of land" to separate the nations (*TSL* 151). Tha'mma's convictions are well encountered by Jethamosai's explanation of a nation. When Tha'mma persuaded to bring Jethamosai to India, his arguments are very worth observing: "Once you start moving you never stop. That's what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: I don't believe in this India-Shindia. It's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere." (*TSL* 215)

Hence, what Anderson says about the existence of 'real' and 'imaginary' nations beautifully align with the novel.

Similarly the movements of characters from London, Calcutta, Dhaka and elsewhere in *The Shadow Lines* posits on the validity of fixed identities. The characters keep shuttling between different locations of both western and eastern countries. Here Paul Gilroy's ideas on national identity are befitting to underline the concept of nationality in the novel. The traditional belief of national identity is grounded in the roots one is associated with. But Gilroy sharply problematizes by saying that national identity is embedded in 'routes' rather than in roots. The construction of identity is an endless ongoing process ever at fashioning and refashioning of its subjects. In *The*

Shadow Lines also the nationality of the characters is not static. It changes with particular temporal and periodical opportunities as it happened with Tha'mma, Ila or Jethamosai. Besides, this same vein of route crisscrosses with the postcolonial ideologies trying to pester the generation in the novel.

Again, Upamanyu Chatterjee's novel *English, August: An Indian Story* is also a fine blend of postcoloniality and nationality as well. The entire plot, story-line and themes are pure reflection of postcolonial ideologies that brings massively detrimental effects on the emerging youth of modern India. The English education, in some poshy academic institutions with Shakespeare and Pope in hands, contributes to mould their changing psychic orientations quite dissimilar to typical Indian imagination. The generation is already superimposed with colonial outlook destined by two hundred years of British colonization. The anti-protagonist Agastya, Dhrubo, Mahendra, Sathe, Mohan, Neera and Renu are defeated by the powerful interceptions of the colonizer's culture and ideologies. Here Loomba's thesis that postcolonial position is evident among the elites only is quite asymmetrical in the novel for these youthful characters belong to well to do family backgrounds with English education in some reputed institutions mostly established by the colonizers. Their state is characterized by dilemma, irresolution, alienation, dislocation and anchorless-ness. They stand at the inter-terrestial stage though they frequently try to embark upon either side. Their identities can be suitably described by Bhabha's concept of hybridity. The idea of nationalism is somewhere submerged in their sub-conscious level. But the strong hold of colonizer's ideological hangover compels them to withdraw their true existence. The side effects of the British Raj are well conveyed by the novelist at the beginning pages of the novel: "District administration in India is largely a British creation, like the railways and the English language, another complex and unweildly bequest of the Raj. But Indianization (of a method of administration, or of a language) is integral to the Indian story" (*EA* 10). The British introduced modern administration, railways and English language but the complexity of the last one is obviously far-reaching as we analyze the text and its characters. The beginning page of the novel conceptualizes the modes of Indianization of English in obscure manner and negotiation of youthful characters with its legacies. Agastya's mimicry before his friend Dhrubo is a good illustration:

> Amazing mix, the English we speak . . . Urdu and American . . . I'm sure nowhere else could languages be mixed and spoken with ease . . . And our accents are Indian, but we prefer August to Agastya. When I say our accents, I, of course, exclude yours, which is unique in its . . . mongrelness – you even say "Have a nice day" to those horny women at your telephones when you pass by with your briefcase, and when you agree with your horrendous boss, which is all the time, you say "yeah great" and "uh-uh." (*EA* 1)

The unique twist of language indicates about the position of Agastya and Dhrubo interrogating on the national sentiments and individual identity. The name 'August' instead of 'Agastya' refers to the preference of emerging youth. The character of Agastya or his entire generation belongs to the "cola generation" a symbolic of internalizing colonial narratives (*EA* 47).

The growth of Agastya, Dhrubo, Prashant, Mahendra, Sathe, Renu or Neera is nurtured in English educational institutions with multicultural representations. But Agastya always preferred his name to be "Keith or

Alan" (02). He wanted to be like those Anglo-Indian girls and boys in Darjeeling. He craved for their glowing white colour. He is the progeny of a mixed blood of Goanese Christian mother and Bngali Hindu father. There is certain intrusion of western religion into the dominant Hindu religion of his father. Besides, he is grown up listening western rock music albums of Keith Jarrett, Scott Joplin, Ella Fitzerald, Vivaldi, Carlos Saura, Cole Porter, Krafft-Ebbing etc. In his youthful days as an IAS trainee in Madna, he combines his taste by including the *Bhagabat-gita*, Tagore's *Shyama* and *Marcus Aurelius.* There is thus a distinctive opposite pulls as these two different genres subscribe two binary philosophy and characteristics.

The tussle between postcoloniality and nationality is reinforced through the conversation between Dhrubo and Agastya during gas the stove malfunction at Dhrubo's residence in Delhi. Dhrubo's displeasure for not writing the instructions in Indian language on the Gas-cylinder when he and Agastya had a narrow escape from the cylinder explosion in Delhi is worth mentioning. He said furiously:

> But why're the instructions in English? The language of the blood-sucking imperialists, they made our hearts weep, and crippled us from appreciating our glorious heritage. I object, and like a good Bengali I'm going to write to the 'Grievances' column of the *Statesman*, that the instructions on a gas cylinder should be in all the fourteen Indian languages recognized by the constitution. (*EA* 159-160)

Though Dhrubo and Agastya are hybridized Indian youth of postcolonial India, there is a tone of sadness, displeasure and voice for re-assertion of nationalism. There is a wish for harmony, peace and psychological discreteness in both social and individual beings. During Agastya's visit to Dr. Darshan Mulatani's residence, Darshan's father recollects the fight for independence of India and the idea of vibrant nationalism prevalent in the hearts of millions of Indians. There is a kind of "irrational pride, a kind of anachronistic nationalism" in senior Multani's voice (*EA* 229). He tells his son Darshan and Agastya how they had missed the great historical moment of India. He says: "You generation has missed the most dramatically significant years, the first five decades of our century …" (*EA* 229). It is a kind of re-kindling of the feelings of nationalism to that new generation. So, Agastya can realize for the moment the "nationalism of those fifty years" and "sufferance of colonial rule" that people like Mr. Multani might have witnessed. He for the moment regrets that he and Darshan could not do so – neither could they understand that great feeling. He regrets that he "had just been born too late. He felt strange, both deprived and curious, what mustn't have been like, to wander the streets of Calcutta and not be allowed entry into the Calcutta Club, Natives Keep Out ... and they have left behind cultural cripples, incapable of appreciation" (*EA* 229-230). On the other hand, the old man continues: "Your generation is what it is, just like the English we speak, it is inevitable. That is why I was surprised at your name, and your knowledge of Bengali, I did not expect it" (*EA* 230).

Whatever they discuss in the dialogism on the colonial regime, independence movement and postcolonial psychological effect on the generation are explication of reality that has been persistent in Indian imagination. The novelist tries to uphold the mirror to life and society of the late 20th century India. The predicament of the Indian youth as discussed above has been inevitable. Modernization as dictated by the compelling western culture,

ideology and technology envisaged through colonization corresponds to loss of Indian cultural discreteness that influences the youth of the nation to rootless-ness and psychic dilemma to a great extent. It pervades in both social and individual behaviour, responsibility, education, choice of vocation, leniency towards drug abuse and their culture and social behaviour. The identity of Indian adolescents and youth is so endangered that they fail to assert their valued existence and right approach to integrate. They arrive at a position that prevents to appreciate to what they had received from the ancestors. So, their alienation from the common humdrum of social living or disinterestedness in their vocation, leniency towards the drugs, marijuana, wines, cigarettes, deprecating sexual orientations and behaviour are bound to hit their life style.

Though Dhrubo has chosen to be an executive in Citibank with handsome salary, he feels administrative job as the better option. He wants to quit the job because he is "sick of Citibank. But not unbearably sick, really. … But ten years later I don't want to tell myself, bastard, you should've changed jobs long long ago. But it's not that really" (*EA* 152). His desire to quit the Citibank job has some connection to his adoption of western life. His conceptualization about the First World as better and bigger since childhood gradually loses its impression on being the part of Yale or an executive in a Citibank. What he says to Agastya, to substantiate the reason of quitting, is the expression of his successive fading allurement to the First World. Hence, he says: "I've … I think I've had enough of this whole occidental connection … All those expense accounts and false accented secretaries, and talk of New York and head office, and our own men in Hong Kong, it's just not *real*, it's an imitation of something elsewhere, do you know what I mean?" (*EA* 152-153).

"And I wear a tie, and use my credit card, and kiss the wives of my colleagues on the cheek when we meet, and I come home and smoke a joint, listen to Scott Joplin and Keith Jarrett, and on weekends I see a horror film, or a Carlos Saura, it's … unreal" (*EA* 153).

Similarly, there is the expression of utter frustration in Renu's letter who teaches M. Phil. Students in some university in New York:

> "The people here are so dull, ignorant, smug and provincial. They are all that, but there's also something very wrong about my attitude to them. Because of my colour, accent, etc., I feel wary and strained talking to Americans – the moment I face one of them, I can feel the shutters going down in me, and I know my face looks blank, bored and closed". (*EA* 155)

She writes: ". . . it's hard getting to know people. Everyone seems friendly at first, everyone stops and asks, 'Hi, how ya doin'?' often awhile you realize that that's it, nothing ever follows up that 'Hi how ya, doin'?" (*EA* 156)

According to Dhrubo, he is "just one more urban Indian bewitched by American hard sell in the Third World" (*EA* 75). Similarly, another The passage continues beautifully elaborating on the character of Mahendra Bhatia as hybridized youth:

> Bhatia liked T-shirts and Calvin Klein jeans, Delhi's fast food joints, Indian motorcycles (because he couldn't afford a foreign one), girl-friends whom he 'could lay anytime, man' (they proved elusive), marijuana, even a little cocaine, the singers who won the Grammy Awards (and whom Indian TV, for his ecstasy, had begun, finally, to show), calling rupees bucks, and being called Mandy. His ambition had been to go abroad ('to the US of A'), perhaps to show it how well he fitted in with his lifestyle. (*EA* 76)

No other characters in the novel are given such concrete detail highlighting on the characters at a single passage. He is one of the finest caricatures of hybridized species. There is nothing he accepts as his own having Indian trademark. Whatever seen, found or practiced in the American or European culture is always adorable and so he tries adopting them in his life immediately. The use of headphones and a walkman or habitual to abusive drugs like cocaine, listener to jazz, hard rock and pop music, wearing faded jeans and T-shirts written something extraordinary on its body is abundantly found in the Western or American culture. So, Mahendra Bhatia, who already possesses a headlong inspired subjectivity under the western pulp culture, rejoices at being a hybrid character. In spite of holding a respectable position as Assistant Conservator of Forests in the society, Bhatia likes to wear Vanderbilt, Calvin Klein Jeans and T-shirts that says "I don't want no star wars" (*EA* 76). In some other occasion, he wears T-shirt that says "Herpes is forever" (*EA* 101).

We can cite some more examples to emphasize on the tug of war that persists between postcoloniality and nationality in that simmers the generation in *English, August*. According to Agatya:

> There are many indigenous methods of suicide. You could change sex, kill your husband if he does not die on his own, and burn yourself on his pyre, but I think sati (suttee to you) is prohibited – they've killed a great Indian tradition, but there's a new one in its place – you could change sex and marry and get your husband to burn you – the ultimate kink experience. (*EA* 77)

Sathe, another hybridized youth is a yellow journalist. He wants to assert his Indian-ness but he fails to do so. The pathetic condition of Sathe can be comprehended with his voice: "Great literature has to have its regional tang – a great Tamil story, for instance, whose real greatness would be ultimately obscure to any non-Tamilian … I presume you know at least three Indian languages, English Hindi and Bengali, yet you find it so difficult to communicate here. And three language, you could be master of Europe" (*EA* 48).

The references to such opposing forces between postcoloniality and nationality that hits the subjects in the novel are abundantly found in these two novels. However, these novelists want to rediscover the urgency of new national narratives and revitalize the slumbering sentiments in the subconscious of the Indian subjects in the novel. Even though the novelists do not convey their messages straight forward to the readers, their concern and means make these two novels significant and timeless as well.

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