

Shadows of the Nation: Amitav Ghosh and the Critique of Nationalism¹

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In a letter to the Commonwealth Foundation (“Relic of a Disputed Past”), the acclaimed Indian English writer, Amitav Ghosh, requested that his name be withdrawn from the list of nominees for the Commonwealth Prize for Literature for the year 2001. Ghosh, whose novel, *The Glass Palace* (2000) was short-listed for the award, suggests in his letter that the acceptance of the Commonwealth award would contradict the anti-colonial spirit of his book. Organizations like the Commonwealth, he contends, rooted in a colonial ethos, continue to devalue the needs and aspirations of the post-colonial world. He thus chooses to reject the complicity that the acceptance of an award from the organization could suggest. In this article, I will try to show that Ghosh’s striking political gesture has profound significance for contemporary Indian English Literature (IEL).

Ghosh’s stand against the Commonwealth draws on a long tradition of nationalism in Indian English writing. A literature composed in the language of that nation’s colonizers almost necessarily occupies a terrain of ambiguity and anxiety. Unable to shed the burden of colonial legacy, IEL has tried to compensate for it by espousing the cause of nationhood. The construction of national culture and community has thus been a persistent motif in IEL. It has been a method for IE writers to express their anti-colonial stand and indigenous identity.

Ghosh, however, is no simple follower of the nationalist tradition in IEL. His stance toward nationalism is more complex and innovative. He represents an emerging trend in IEL, strongly characterized by a skepticism of nationalism. The significance of this trend can hardly be over-emphasized as IEL has been tied to nationalist ideology since its inception. This essay tries to show that Ghosh’s letter to the Commonwealth in conjunction with his fictional works mark a defining moment in the

history of IEL. He carves out a space for IE writing where the critique of nationalist ideology is consistent with one's solidarity with the nation. I foreground Ghosh's remarkable stance by offering a reading of his novel, *The Shadow Lines* (1988) along with a discussion of his letter. But prior to that, I will unpack the nature of the relationship between IEL and nationalist ideology. The following section will discuss the theoretical tensions implicit in the politics of IEL. Finally, in reading Ghosh's work, I will attempt to show how the writer offers a novel resolution to the dilemmas of a literature tied to colonial history in a neo-colonial world.

The Anxiety of Nationalism

The preoccupation with nationalism in IEL needs to be understood in relation to the politics of the English language. British colonial rule was responsible for introducing the study of the English language in India. The extensive research on the subject is unanimous in the view that even though the British offered their "civilizing mission" as the principal motivation behind the institution of English studies, the actual reasons were political and ideological, serving the interests of the empire (Krishnaswamy and Burde; Agnihotri and Khanna; Sunder Rajan; Viswanathan). The anti-colonial leadership, however, also adopted English as its preferred language as it realized the significance of the "master's" language to subvert his rule. Thus even as English was used in the struggle against colonialism, in the course of time, it was entrenched as an official language in independent India.² The language, however, continues to occupy a very problematic position in the country. Apart from its colonial legacy, English remains the language of the privileged minority in postcolonial India. Today less than 5% of India's massive population is conversant in English, and the English educated section is almost exclusively constitutive of the urban elite. Indian nationalism with its anti-colonial and egalitarian aspirations thus shares an uneasy relationship with the English language.

The contending demands of language and nationalism are crucial for an understanding of the peculiar situation of the Indian English writer. In a similar context, the Kenyan writer and activist, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, decries the use of English by African writers, "[t]he choice

of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe" (4). The Indian English writer has inevitably been haunted by doubts and self-questioning, as she intrinsically realizes, like Thiong'o, the centrality of language to a culture. The viability and desirability of a literature in an "alien" language has also been a staple of the literary criticism of IEL since its inception (Jussawallah; Basu; Datta; Lal; Chandra). Unfortunately, a language that is mired in a continuing history of oppression cannot offer its user the luxury of indifference.

The IE writer's dilemma has been brought into sharp relief by the postcolonial critic, Meenakshi Mukherjee. She identifies the phenomenon that results from the peculiar pressures under which IEL is produced as the "anxiety of Indianness" (2607–2611). Writing in the colonial language, Mukherjee contends, the writer keenly feels the pressure to prove her loyalty to the nation. It is this pressure that produces the "anxiety" in the writer to prove her "Indianness" as a "compensatory act" for the "supposed alienness/elitism of the language" (2608). The writer then feels obliged to compensate in her literature for what she lost in the choice of her language. This is reflected, Mukherjee observes, in the all too evident themes and literary devices in IEL that express the writers' indigenous roots. Mukherjee's contention is borne out above all in the recurrent constructions of national culture and community in IEL.

The works of Raja Rao provide an instructive instance of the construction of narratives with clearly identifiable indigenous concerns. Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938), for instance, narrates the story of a South Indian village at the moment of the Gandhian offensive against the Empire. Apart from the obvious nationalist theme, Rao experiments with the English language³ as well as with conventional narrative modes to produce a nativized narrative mode that he believes to be more conducive to his indigenous themes. Rao's *Kanthapura* is indeed an illuminating instance of a writer's engagement with a distinct literary form. Unfortunately, some of the radical literary possibilities signaled by that novel remain largely unexplored, not only by Rao's contemporaries, but by the author himself, beyond his first novel. In Rao's later works like

The Serpent and the Rope (1960), the creative engagement in formulating an indigenous and distinctive narrative mode is replaced by an adherence to simplistic and reductive notions of “Indianness”. The concern with narrativizing the nation leads to an equation of the nation’s “essence” with religion and spirituality. As Rumina Sethi, in her full length study of Rao notes, in Rao’s later works “the romance/metaphysical far outweighs the history/nationalistic model” (69). Thus, instead of working on a literature drawing from an engagement with the broader culture and its history (as *Kanthapura*, in many senses was), Rao started equating India with only its spiritual aspects, and the spiritual with just the esoteric Brahmanical world-view.

Other writers, in varying degrees, echo a similar preoccupation with identity that often manifests itself in what has come to be termed as the “East-West” theme. The demarcation of cultures, implicit in the genre, helps reinforce the indigenous identity of the writer. G. V. Desani’s *All About H. Hatterr* (1948), a highly stylized, allegory of the psychology of the colonial subject, for instance, would be an ideal candidate for the genre of “East-West” novels. It would be much less easy to categorize the works of the more widely known R.K. Narayan. Narayan’s novels set in the fictional town of Malgudi with its characters involved in the human drama of life, self-consciously stray away from political concerns and ideologies.⁴ And yet, it is in their very denial that Narayan’s texts play out the “East-West” theme with its attendant construct of India. By refusing to be located in recognizable space and rejecting any significant involvement with specific political concerns, Narayan’s novels lay claim not to this or that geographical region or social issue but to the whole of India and its “timeless” concerns. Graham Greene, in his Introduction to one of Narayan’s novels, observes that in the Malgudi novels “we are aware not of an individual author, with views on politics and social reform, or with personal mysticism to express, but of a whole national condition” (*Bachelor of Arts* ix). Delightful as Narayan’s novels are, it does not help to overlook that the allegedly quintessentially “Indian” world of Malgudi is after all Hindu, its ethos, upper-caste, its values resistant to change, not only from contact with the West, but also from indigenous political movements. It is unquestionably a writer’s privilege

to choose the givens of any fictional narrative and Narayan does a wonderful job within his selected parameters. But to view in the world of Malgudi, the “national condition,” as Greene does, is only to submit to an easy and available reductionism regarding the nation.

Unlike Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, deeply influenced by Marxist theory and social movements, attempts to represent the plight of the underprivileged sections in his novels, like *The Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936). Similarly, Kamla Markandya tries to foreground the sufferings of the poor Indian woman in her works like *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954). Yet, even in these novels that avow social realism, the representation of a community functioning in various local and specific registers is sacrificed in favor of the anxiety to present a pan-Indian situation. Once again, the need to portray “Indianness” takes precedence over an engagement with the lived reality of community and individual experiences. Mukherjee suggests that it is the writer’s uncertainty about her reader’s insider knowledge of the culture that pushes her towards a “minimalistic representation” and a “greater pull towards a homogenization of reality, an essentializing of India, a certain flattening out of the complicated and conflicting contours, the ambiguous and shifting relations that exist between individuals and groups in a plural community” (*Anxiety* 2608). It is perhaps this gap between the complex and conflicting reality of the nation and its literary representation that prompted Mahatma Gandhi to observe that Mulk Raj Anand’s under-caste characters in *The Untouchable* sounded too much like Bloomsbury intellectuals (qtd. in Mishra 2). It is ironic that in the works of these writers, the act of writing in English generates the need to identify with the nation, but the anxiety of identification leads the writer away from the experiential reality of the nation toward rarefied ideological constructs.

It is only in the early eighties, beginning with Salman Rushdie, that the anxiety of nationalism is subjected to scrutiny and rejection by some IE writers.⁵ A variety of complex social factors generated the new trend in IEL in which nationalism came to be regarded with a strong dose of suspicion. Historically, the country had witnessed a definite shift from the socialist and secular ideals of the anti-colonial movement. The declaration of a state of national Emergency by Prime Minister Indira

Gandhi in 1975, solely to protect her political position, worked to undermine the democratic basis of the polity. The national intelligentsia shared a general sense of disenchantment with the lofty idealism of the anti-colonial moment and disillusionment about the nation's political destiny. At this historical juncture, for the Indian English writer, the imaginative possibilities for the construction of a homogenous national community were rather meager. Instead an engagement with the socio-political travails of the young nation as well as a reevaluation of the failing ideals of nationalism appeared to be the more desirable alternative. Amitav Ghosh emerged as a central figure to pave the way for this novel direction in IEL.

The (II)legitimacy of Nationalism

The legitimacy of nationalism in third-world, postcolonial societies has been a contentious theoretical issue. The ideological import of cultural production has also been at stake in these debates. In one of his much discussed essays, Fredric Jameson contends that the rightful questioning of nationalist ideology in the first world might not be politically a desirable trend to be followed in the context of the third world. Nationalism, according to Jameson, is significant if the "radical difference" of the third world, in the spheres of politics and culture, is to be maintained. The rejection of nationalism opens up the possibility of the negation and/or representational appropriation of third-world realities by North American postmodernist culture. Jameson then makes his significant claim that third-world cultural productions embody the unique characteristics of that world and in that sense "all third world texts are necessarily... *national allegories*" (69; emphasis in original). As nationalism has been a preeminent motif in IEL, it may be viewed to be a clear illustration of Jameson's argument. Even though the particular anxiety faced by IE writers might not be the onslaught of North American postmodernism, it certainly is an apprehension of the cultural politics of the Western/colonial world. The avowal of nationalism then follows from the need to protect what Jameson sees as the "radical difference" of the nation.

The fundamental problem with this phenomenon in IEL, as I have tried to show, is that the literature remains tied only to certain em-

blematic and ideologically problematic notions of nationhood. In their anxiety of Indianness, the writers trade the vibrant, everydayness of Indian culture and its myriad sociopolitical contradictions for some of its historical and cultural icons. In remaining tied to nationalist ideology, IEL fails to represent what Homi Bhabha terms the “temporality” and “locality” of culture (292). Bhabha draws attention to the suppression of cultural narratives in the “grim prose” (1) of nationalist history. In privileging the “present of people’s history,” (303) Bhabha, however, feels the need to question the validity of *all* historicist perspectives. The historicist framework evolving through anti-colonial struggles, however, has undeniable value. The here and now of people’s histories need not necessarily be viewed to be antithetical to historicist constructions. The problem in IEL is not that it has embraced historicist perspectives but that it has allied itself to ideologically problematic historicist constructions. It is the alliance with a statist version of nationalism that has made it hard for Indian English writers to engage with the “present” of the nation’s history. What we have in IEL, then, may be viewed to be an enactment of the tension between the *Nation* and *Nationalist ideology*.

The unresolved tension between the two, is arguably the blind spot in Jameson’s argument. In the Indian subcontinent, nationalism indeed emerged as a progressive force that voiced the interests and aspirations of the whole nation, cutting across all social boundaries, by identifying the common enemy—British imperialism. However, after political independence, because of the nature and composition of its national bourgeoisie, nationalism in India increasingly started acquiring an exclusive elitist character. Critics of varied theoretical persuasion have interrogated the legitimacy of nationalist ideology and its claim to represent the nation. Aijaz Ahmad, for instance, points out that while Jameson’s intention to uphold the voice of the colonized world is entirely salutary, it needs to be emphasized that *nationalism is not necessarily the language in which that voice speaks*. While Jameson draws attention to the class character of nationalism, Partha Chatterjee points to the radically different sociocultural origins of the ideology. Chatterjee contends that nationalism, an ideology with European roots, is ill equipped to reflect the needs and aspirations of third-world postcolonial societies. Jameson’s espous-

al of third-world nationalism, as noted earlier, stems from an urgent need to safeguard the newfound sense of identity of erstwhile-colonized people against North American postmodernism or neo-imperialism. It may be contended, however, that the “difference” of the third world, which Jameson wishes to protect from the inexorable neo-imperialist march of postmodernism, cannot be achieved by evading the radical differences *within* the third world.

Another critic, scrupulously tracing the ravages of colonialism, had worked his way through the contending claims of national consciousness and national culture, long before the contemporary discussions around postcoloniality. Frantz Fanon, writing in the context of the Algerian liberation struggle in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s, identifies common pitfalls of the cosmopolitan intellectual/artist searching for a unified and consolidated sense of national culture. A national culture, with its immense plurality and complexity, however, offers no simplified and unitary translation that the intellectual desires. Fanon’s famous dictum, “culture abhors simplification” is directed against this cosmopolitan intellectual or artist, who in his desire (anxiety) to identify with his people, ends up instead producing a narrative of exoticism:

When at the height of his intercourse with his people, whatever they were or whatever they are, the intellectual decides to come down into the common paths of real life, he only brings back from his adventuring, formulas which are sterile in the extreme. He sets a high value on the customs, traditions and the appearances of his people; but his inevitable painful experience only seems to be a banal search for exoticism.... The culture that the intellectual leans towards is often no more than a stock of particularisms... Culture has never the translucidity of customs; it abhors all simplification. (177)

Fanon’s caustic but astute characterization of the cosmopolitan intellectual’s misguided sense of national culture is deeply relevant to the profession of “Indianness” in IEL. As discussed earlier, this body of literature, in its deep anxiety to be nationalistic, ends up projecting certain static cultural symbols as *the* national culture.

Having rejected a certain kind of cultural reductionism, one that presents itself as nationalism, Fanon does not question the possibility of theorizing culture in terms of national consciousness. In a dialogic move that synthesizes the demands of both nation and culture, he contends that it is the myriad practices of a people, in its constant struggle to define itself, in that “zone of occult instability” (183) that we have the emergence of a “national culture.” It is this Fanonesque sense of national consciousness that foreground the many voices in which the nation speaks—voices appropriated and marginalized within the discourse of nationalism—that has been prominently missing in IEL until the 1980’s.

Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), a triumphantly iconoclastic work, is arguably the pioneering IE text that challenges entrenched representations of nationalism in politics and literature. In his relentless depiction of the numerous contradictions that constitute the nation, Rushdie departs from the convention in IEL of celebrating a dominant version of nationalist ideology. In spite of all its problematization of dominant nationalist historiography, however, the novel never really goes beyond the critical depiction of state organized events in the history of the subcontinent. There is little portrayal of people’s experiences of these events and almost none, of other, subaltern histories, eluded by dominant historiography (Ratih and Roosa). That said, it is the discursive space opened by Rushdie that is occupied and modified by Ghosh.

The Shadow Lines, published seven years after *Midnight’s Children*, raises the stakes much higher for the critique of nationalism in IEL. Designating the very category of nationhood as unconscionably divisive, it instead prioritizes the fluidity of experiential reality. The novel’s rejection of nationalist ideology is not, however, insensitive to Jameson’s concerns regarding the necessity of independent identity for third world nations. The critique of nationalism emerges in the text not from some form of deracinated cosmopolitanism, but from the lived experiences of culturally rooted characters. In locating the critique of nationalism in an alternative view of history that itself is derived from the often-silenced voices of the nation, *The Shadow Lines* pitches the Nation against Nationalism. Ghosh thus retains Fanon’s concept of “national consciousness” and expands its horizon beyond nationalist identity.

The Novel: The Nation and the World

In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh challenges the convention of portraying the nation as a unique entity by designating the lines that demarcate nations as “shadowy” or unreal. The metaphor of shadow lines in the novel refers not only to the contestable boundaries between lands but also to other fences that seek to separate imagination and reality, past and present, memory and desire. However, the organizing structure of the novel is such that the various shadow lines converge to focus on the central category of interrogation—the shadow lines between nations.

The story unfolds through the recollections of the unnamed narrator, of his life and experiences, surrounded by his extended family and friends. The two figures that have the strongest influence on the child narrator are his Grandmother and Tridib, a distant relative. The critique of nationalism in the novel emerges through the contrasting characters and ideologies of these two figures. The child narrator is strongly attached to his Grandmother and accepts the strict disciplinary training that she imposes on him, much as any child would accept the impositions of a basically well-intentioned and loving adult. However, it is Tridib with his extraordinary worldview that holds sway over the young narrator’s imagination. Tridib and Grandmother represent two antithetical principles, two divergent ways of approaching reality. The novel, almost unequivocally, affirms Tridib’s position over that of Grandmother’s. Yet, Grandmother remains very much within the sympathetic range of the novel.

It is significant that Grandmother, in whom the narrator has a strong emotional investment, is also the repository of the ideology that is the primary target of critique of the novel. This double move allows the narrator to effectively expose the insidiousness of nationalist ideology and its prevalence as a “regular middle class” worldview. An approach to life, like that of Grandmother’s, is shown to be most strongly characterized, by the way it normalizes difference, whether of nationality or of class. Her worldview is situated within the larger context of a life that has withstood massive emotional and economic hardships in an unsympathetic society. Widowed at an early age, she strives against all societal odds to maintain an independent existence for herself and her son. Her middle class status is the result of a life of struggles and because of

that, she believes that she can never afford to take her class position for granted. Her not so subtle denigration of people from the lower classes betrays her anxiety to guard her own class status. Thus when the narrator's mother wishes to help a relative, who is not doing too well financially, Grandmother stops her saying, "once these people start making demands, it never ends" (136). It is the same sense of insecurity and prejudice that marks her spirited embrace of nationalism.

Grandmother's attitude to Tridib further defines her character, at the same time as shedding light on their different and distinct approaches to life. Tridib's generally bohemian life style is anathema to Grandmother. Unlike his globetrotting family, Tridib chooses to stay on in the family's old and crumbling ancestral house in Calcutta. He is working on a Ph.D. in Archaeology, which Grandmother could normally respect, had there been the prospect of a "named professorship" at the end of it, but there is no such hope with Tridib. One of her major complaints against Tridib is that he had not taken advantage of his well-connected father to make a life for himself with a "respectable career." The fact that Tridib did not get along with his father does not seem like even a remotely acceptable reason to her. That one would allow something so frivolous as one's "likes and dislikes" to interfere with the "business of fending for oneself in the world" make them odd and irresponsible to her (6). What makes her really wary of Tridib is that she had spotted him a few times at street corner tea-stall *addas*⁶ hanging out with, what she sees as other good-for-nothings like him, whiling away his time. She has a "deep horror" of such young people, or "fail cases" (7) who have nothing better to do with their time. After all, the proper use of time, is for her, the essence of success, "time," she believes, is "like a toothbrush: it went mouldy, if it wasn't used." And when asked by her curious grandson what happened to wasted time, her reply is "it begins to stink" (4). The narrator's fascination for Tridib proceeds from the fact that Tridib effortlessly challenges Grandmother's whole worldview: "[t]hat was why I loved to listen to Tridib: he never seemed to use his time, but his time didn't stink" (4).

Grandmother's aggressive nationalism is in consonance with her middle-class world of caution and class, always armed to protect itself from what she views to be threatening vagaries of imagination or in-

dulgence. If she constantly feels the need to protect and define herself against the lower classes to guard her middle-class self-image, her nationalism ensures the same protection and self-definition against imagined enemies across the borders. This is reflected in her seemingly innocuous, but potentially threatening views like “you can’t build a strong country without building a strong body” (8). Her views are underpinned by a glorification of violence and machismo in the larger interest of the nation. Thus she lauds England’s long history of “war and bloodshed” to her grandson, the narrator:

It took those people a long time to build that country; hundreds of years, of war and bloodshed. Everyone who lived there has earned his right to be there with blood; with their brother’s blood and their father’s blood and their son’s blood. They know they’re 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 do for India, don’t you see? (77–78)

Her desire to see an India united by blood is underpinned by a hysterical sense of insecurity and potential danger. And it is this hysterical aspect of her nationalism that comes to the fore during India’s war with China in 1962, when, in a fit of frenzy, she declares “we have to kill them before they kill us” (237).

Ila, the narrator’s cousin, characterizes Grandmother as a “war-mongering fascist” (78). Ila herself is a globetrotting, cosmopolitan activist for politically correct causes. But she is said to live in a world of moral absolutes and “context had no place in her judgments” (82). It falls to Tridib to provide a contextualized understanding of Grandmother’s worldview. “No, she was not a fascist,” Tridib would say, her views, according to him, had a different motivation:

[...] she was only a modern middle-class woman [...] 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 na-

tionhood 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 all its fullness and for which she could never forgive it. (78)

Tridib's evaluation of Grandmother, even as it is more context-sensitive than Ila's assessment of her, is the more alarming of the two. Warmongering fascists (as Ila describes Grandmother) are after all, not commonplace, and are therefore easy to dismiss. What makes Tridib's designation more sinister, is the casual way he normalizes Grandmother's worldview by pointing to its prevalence and acceptance "the world over." He characterizes her desires as seemingly innocent and unassuming: "this is all she wanted..." And yet the novel itself testifies to the fact that there is nothing innocent or unassuming in this middle-class desire for "self-respect and national power."

Even as Grandmother remains a virulent advocate for nationalist ideology, her own life associated with different parts of the subcontinent exposes the arbitrariness of nationalism. She was born and raised in the Eastern part of Bengal, which seceded from India as part of Pakistan in 1947. Fifteen years after the Partition of the country, she finds out that her uncle is alive and still living in their ancestral house in Dacca, East Pakistan. She feels charged with the mission of "rescuing" him from an "alien country." Ironically, the "alien country" is the country where her uncle had lived his whole life, apart from the fact that it is also the country of her own origin. But because of her deep conviction that national boundaries are based on real differences, "she had not been able to quite understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality" (152). The fact that her old uncle was in Pakistan, instead of India, was also to her part of the "mess," and she sets it upon herself to correct it.

The climactic events in Dacca expose the disquieting underside of the identification with what the narrator calls "large abstract entities" like nations. Grandmother makes a special trip to Dacca, to bring her uncle back "home" to India. Once there, she tries to convince her old uncle that it is not safe for him, a Hindu, to be staying in Pakistan, and that he has to move while he can. Her uncle, however, has other views:

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 to?... As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here (215).

And yet, as events take shape, the uncle does need to be rescued at one point, and in India, but in Dacca itself. Grandmother spots her uncle at a street near his house just as a frenzied mob charged with sectarian passions is about to attack him. At the time, she is in a car with her family. Now that he really needs to be rescued, her response is instructive. Recalling the events, seventeen years later, May, a common friend, recalls to the narrator, "Your grandmother wanted to drive away" (250). Sensing that the mob could also prove to be potentially dangerous for herself and her family, she chooses to avert that risk and rather see her uncle being attacked and killed. It is a remarkable feat of the novel that the two actions of Grandmother—first, traveling to another country to "save" her uncle and second, refusing to reach out to him in his actual hour of need—do not appear to be inconsistent. Her nationalism, we are given to understand, is not antithetical to her narrow sense of self-interest and insecurity. Indeed it is the latter that often lies at the very heart of nationalist ideology.

It is perhaps fitting in the novelistic scheme of things that Tridib, who in essence represents the alternative to Grandmother's worldview, loses his own life, trying to save the uncle from the mob. The novel charts the progression of the narrator's life into adulthood but it is not a chronological narration of events. Thus, even though the narrator is only twelve at the time of the Dacca episode, he learns the facts about Tridib's death as an adult, at the very end of the novel. However, it is Tridib's real and haunting presence that, in some crucial senses, encapsulates the guiding wisdom of the novel.

In place of the various *differences* erected by space and time, Tridib posits *desire*. The narrator recalls that as a child, even though he had not traveled beyond a few miles of Calcutta, Tridib had given him "worlds to travel in and... eyes to see them with." The problem of distance, Tridib

had taught him, was something that could be conquered, not so much through travel, but through desire and a precise use of one's imagination. The distance and the difference between the Self and the Other, between "oneself and one's image in the mirror" could only be overcome through "a longing for every thing that was not in oneself, a torment of the flesh, that carried one beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and other places..." (29). Ila, who unlike the narrator, had actually traveled to distant and remote parts of the world, objects to Tridib's gospel of desire and imagination. "Why," she asks of the narrator, "why should we try, why not take the world as it is?" (31) To that, the narrator could only go back to Tridib, who would have said that there *is* "no world as it is." If we did not try to desire and imagine our own reality, "the alternative wasn't blankness—it only meant... that we would never be free of other people's inventions" (31). Tridib's insistence on the reinvention of reality signifies the alternative to Grandmother's world order of naturalized differences. The adult narrator's interrogation of the principles on which nations are formed, as well as of nationalist historiography, affirms Tridib's wisdom over that of Grandmother's. The novel has been both lauded and critiqued for its ideological stance on nationalism. Robert Dixon, for instance, celebrates the work for its critique of a "culture rooted in a single place" and instead positing "a discursive space that flows across political and national boundaries" (10). A. N. Kaul, however, takes issue with the novel for the very reasons that motivate Dixon to praise it. Critiquing what he describes as a "too simplistic view of historical reality" that calls "nations 'inventions,'" Kaul asks: "How can Ghosh be interested in the real possibilities and the real difficulties of going beyond national divisions... when for him they scarcely exist?" (303).

It is interesting that even as Dixon and Kaul subscribe to different political positions on the issue of nationalism, their critiques proceed from a common assumption about the novel. They agree that *The Shadow Lines* chooses not to recognize the full political import of nations and nationalist ideology. While Dixon holds that Ghosh's choice allows him to explore other realities, Kaul finds in it an "evasion" of political realities. I would suggest, however, the assumption that the novel does not fully acknowledge and engage with the political reality of nations and

nationalism needs to be challenged. The novel quite clearly appreciates the political and ideological import of nationalist ideology. What it does not do, however, is endorse that ideology.

Tridib has been viewed by various critics of the novel to be the alter ego of the narrator and even the ur-hero of the novel (Klinlenborg 38; Mukherjee 265–66; Kaul 307). Even though there may be reasons for such a reading, it needs to be contended that the political statement the novel makes does not completely derive from Tridib's "transcendent wisdom." It is the adult narrator's *political translation* of Tridib's views, that is the real signal towards a radically different perspective on history and politics. For the narrator, the "invention of one's own reality" is not a subjective or voluntarist goal. Such invention was necessary, according to Tridib, if one wanted to be free of other people's inventions. But the freedom from other, more powerful versions of reality, can often be accomplished, the narrator realizes, only in a politically contested arena. The precondition to the realization of one's own version of reality is therefore an engagement with other, more accepted versions. It is thus that the narrator explores, in vivid and agonizing detail, some of the more questionable aspects of nationalist ideology.

Fifteen years after Tridib's death, the narrator flips through the pages of an old Bartholomew's Atlas, "trying to learn the meaning of distance." (232) His reflections add poignancy to the perhaps obvious fact that distance is determined much more by national boundaries, than by the relative geographic location of areas. He wonders at the fact, for instance, that Chiang Mai in Thailand is quite near to Calcutta, the city where he had grown up. But he had never before heard of Chiang Mai. Yet he had always known about Delhi which is much further away from Calcutta than Chiang Mai because Delhi, unlike the city in Thailand, is part of India. Nation states thus have the power to render physical proximity meaningless and instead construct identities that elicit loyalties based on contestable, if not arbitrary, lines of demarcation. The one event, the narrator realizes, in a frightening flash, in which people across national boundaries can have a strong and shared investment, is war. It is as if "there were only states and citizens: there were no people at all." (233) The construction of national identities is made possible then only at the

expense of other identities and relationships. For the political logic of nation states require, that “to exist at all they must claim the monopoly of all relationships between peoples.” (230)

National identity not only marginalizes all other identities and relationships of people *across* nations, it also requires the suppression of contradictions and contesting identities *within* the nation. In one of the defining moments of the novel, the narrator finds that his memories of a particularly traumatic social event in his childhood, were not shared by any of his friends. His memories were of a religious riot that he had witnessed as a child but it was an event that none of his friends remembered. They all did have, however, distinct memories of another event, which had taken place two years before the riots remembered by the narrator. It was the 1962 Indian war with China. The war, as the narrator’s friend observes, was after all, “the most important thing that happened in the country” at that time, and a riot, on the other hand is a “local thing... hardly comparable to a war” (220). The narrator, however, refuses to accept his friend’s reasoning. He intuitively realizes that the acceptance of his friend’s line of reasoning would mean the appropriation of his own memories by the logic of the state.

The only way to legitimize his memories, the narrator realizes, is to lend concrete historical form to them. Thus he embarks on an archival journey, to reconstruct the events around the 1964 riots. His explorations reveal that the riots hardly received any media attention, and had thus left no traces in public memory. And yet, the actual number of people killed were “not very many less than were killed in the war of 1962” (229). The telling silence about the riots then proceeds, not from the fact of their lack of importance, as the narrator’s friend believes. The reason lies elsewhere. Riots, unlike wars, do not affirm and assert national identity; instead they question its validity. They point to the presence of social and political tensions that lie outside the homogenizing logic of the nation. And that which contradicts the all-encompassing ideology of the nation is all too often relegated to a chasm of silence.

And yet, if there is any one thing, that characterizes and distinguishes the recent history of the subcontinent, it would have to be the ominous implications of the politics of religious identity. To the extent that na-

tionalist historiography marginalizes this fact, it falsifies the history of the region. Thus, it is extremely significant that the narrator chooses to rescue the history of the 1964 riots, from the jaws, as it were, of the more powerful nationalist history of the 1962 war. The narrator connects the experience of the terror that had gripped him as a child, in a school bus, in the midst of the riot, with the larger historical experience of the subcontinent:

That particular fear has a texture you can neither forget nor describe [...] It is a fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the street that one inhabits, can become suddenly and without warning as hostile as a desert in a flash flood. It is this that sets apart the thousand million people who inhabit the subcontinent from the rest of the world—not language, not food, not music—it is the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of the war between oneself and one's image in the mirror (204).

The narrator's friend had dismissed the significance of this memory of the riot, for riots were after all, he had said, a local matter. Earlier in the novel, Ila, serenely confident of the centrality of her own political and geographic location, had similarly proclaimed that the "famines and riots and disasters" (104) that happened in the backwaters of the world, did not really compare with the significance of "revolutions and anti-fascist wars" (104) that set political examples to the world. These views are not all that distinct from Grandmother's, who had a passionate faith in the global significance of the Nation and of national identity.

It is in response to the combined force of this all too prevalent and powerful world-view that the narrator chooses to place his "local and unimportant" experience of fear in a larger historical context. In doing so, he makes a crucial political statement. The ideology of nationalism is exposed for its suppression of myriad personal and political events and experiences. And his experience, like famines and riots and disasters is constitutive of the "silence of voiceless events in a backward world," (104) that need to be retrieved from the annals of the histories of revolutions and nationalist wars. Against the awe-inspiring might of nation-

alist ideology, the narrator posits the actuality of people and politics, which that ideology so often seeks to suppress.

Ghosh's work is characterized by its grim appreciation of the force of nationalist ideology in the contemporary world. The challenge to nationalism in the novel, however, ensues not from the critical perspective of a dispassionate observer but emerges from the lives and experiences of culturally rooted characters. The remarkable characterization of the Grandmother as a figure at once deserving unequivocal ideological censure and yet inciting sympathy and understanding captures the insidious ubiquity of nationalist ideology. If nationalism is situated right in the midst of postcolonial culture, the critique of this all-pervasive ideology also emerges from the same site. The adult narrator's questioning of nationalist ideology is rooted in the individual and social experiences of the nation's recent past and its present.

In contrast to a dominant view of nationalism, Ghosh's *Shadow Lines* asserts that the critique of nationalism need not be antithetical to the affirmation of sociocultural specificities. Indeed, it reveals the homogenizing logic of nationalism that erases both cultural and political differences within the nation and construct arbitrary divisions across nations. Thus the rejection of nationalism in the novel is not so much a flight from reality as some critics have argued; instead, it is an attempt to imagine reality in a different way.

The Letter: National Consciousness Sans Nationalism

The critique of nationalism in *The Shadow Lines* is complemented by the affirmation of the Nation in Ghosh's letter to the Commonwealth. His grounds for rejecting any association with the organization are instructive. His novel, *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh writes, could become eligible for the Commonwealth award for two reasons, first, that it is written in English, and second, that he happens to belong to a region that was once ruled by Imperial Britain. And these reasons, he submits, are for him the least persuasive ones for judging the merit of a book. Ghosh's rebuttal of the selection process employed for the Commonwealth award, questions the very rationale for the existence of the organization and marks his solidarity with his nation.

His gesture, according to Ghosh, is not a denial of a certain past, but an assertion that “the ways in which we remember the past are not determined solely by the brute facts of time: they are also open to choice, reflection and judgment” (Letter 19). The phrase, Commonwealth, does not refer to the present realities of the countries in question, nor could it possibly refer to a vision for the future, all it does is erect a “memorialization of the Empire” (Letter 19). Ghosh thus objects to the subtle ways in which organizations like the Commonwealth obstruct the path to self-actualization for postcolonial nations. The rejection of the category foregrounds the right to self-representation denied to a part of the world for too long. It thereby signifies the writer’s identification with the experiences and aspirations of his nation and indeed with that of the whole postcolonial world.

The fact that the Commonwealth refuses to acknowledge literatures in languages other than English foregrounds its politics of discrimination. It is extremely significant that Ghosh centralizes the issue of language in his rejection of the Commonwealth nomination. It marks his solidarity with the numerous writers writing in the vernacular in India and throughout the postcolonial world. By doing so, Ghosh helps resolve the long conflictual relationship between IEL and literature in regional languages. With his striking gesture, he makes the point that the use of the colonizer’s language need not and should not be viewed as a sign of complicity with the politics of colonialism.

IEL remained wedded to nationalist ideology for a long time, as the desirability of that ideology was taken to be unquestionable. For it was nationalism that had marked the death knell of colonialism. The ideology of nationalism, when challenged by postcolonial writers like Ghosh, elicits some legitimate political misgivings. It is feared, for instance, that questioning nationalism might be an invitation to some kind of facile internationalism, underwritten by new forms of power structures. The political import of Ghosh’s letter helps assuage such misgivings. It indicates that nationalist ideology can be questioned, without foregoing solidarity with the nation. The direction in IEL, signified by writers like Ghosh, then may be viewed as being in consonance with Fanon’s call for national consciousness without nationalism (199).

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Vivek Chibber and Ira Raja for their comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper.
- 2 For a discussion of how Jawahar Lal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, championed the cause of the English language, see Robert King, *Nehru and the Language Politics of India*, 125–31.
- 3 Rao is viewed to be one of the pioneers in the use of Pidgin English by postcolonial critics. See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (55).
- 4 The only exception to this is Narayan's least discussed novel *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955).
- 5 It needs to be noted that by no means do all texts written prior to the eighties fall under the broad category of nationalism in IEL. Writers like Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande, for instance, focusing largely on middle class women's lives and family experiences, have largely steered clear of the preoccupation with nation and nationalism. What I have tried to sketch is the dominant trend in the literature of the pre-Rushdie period. The few texts that lie outside the dominant paradigm of nationalism in that period, do not pose a challenge to the paradigm.
- 6 The Bengali word *adda* refers to an established cultural practice of friends getting together for long, unrigorous conversations. For an interesting socio-historical discourse on the subject, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, 2000. 180–213.

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