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Paper-II : Twentieth Century Indian Writing

The Shadow Lines

This Unit is meant to give you essential background information on the author and his works and his major concerns and also on the issue of partition and nationalism and borders raised by *The Shadow Lines*. With this background in mind you should be able to approach your study of the novel with fuller confidence and deeper understanding.

Introduction to Indian Writing in English

The Shadow Lines by Amitav Ghosh was written in 1988. The syllabus of this course in the English honours syllabus of the University of Delhi is meant to introduce you to Indian writing in English. You will come across two terms used to describe this literature—Indian-English writing or simply Indian English writing. You are free to use either.

I hope you realize that the corpus of Indian English writing is substantial and is growing apace. This includes a large number of novels, a lot of poetry and also some plays. Much of this writing is of considerable quality. Some well-known names—all of them novelists—are Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Premchand Sehgal, Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande and lately Salman Rushdie. And there are many many others. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* are well known and I hope you have read or at least heard of them. I need hardly remind you that the film *Guide* made by Devdas Gulati was based on a novel of the same name by R. K. Narayan. And the serial *Malgudi Days* shows us the Doodhcharan and other stories of the same author.

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PART I : BACKGROUND TO THE SHADOW LINES (1988) BY AMITAV GHOSH

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1. Objective

This Unit is meant to give you essential background information on the author and his works and his major concerns and also on the issue of partition and nationalism and borders raised by *The Shadow Lines*. With this background in mind you should be able to approach your study of the novel with fuller confidence and clearer understanding.

2. Introduction to Indian Writing in English

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A major landmark in Indian English novel was *Midnight's Children* (1981) by Salman Rushdie. This novel showed a new confidence and felicity in the use of language, which was marked by a fertility of invention and a readiness to experiment with form and themes. Rushdie's pathbreaking novel in fact ushered in a new era for Indian English writing. Some of the leading names of writers of the post-Rushdie period are Vikram Seth, Alan Sealy, Shashi Tharoor, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Vikram Chandra, Arundhati Roy and most recently perhaps Pankaj Mishra whose novel *The Romantics* has been currently reviewed in newspapers and periodicals. It is to this set, most of whom are products of one college—St. Stephen's College, Delhi—that Amitav Ghosh belongs.

The success that some of these writers have achieved has been fabulous. Vikram Seth, for instance, is said to have received a royalty advance of two and a half crore of rupees for his *Suitable*

Boy (1995) from his British publisher Orion. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) apart from winning the Booker Prize was even more successful both as a media event and as a money-spinner. Pankaj Mishra's book also seems to have done remarkably well financially.

But the media attention and the money that some of the recent novels in English have received have been described by many critics as being far out of proportion to their literary merits and have been attributed, among other things, to their language i.e. English. English clearly is a language of privilege.

As an antidote to this kind of exaggerated respect for Indian writing in English, I would like you to go back to the classics in your own language and in other Indian languages, in translation, if necessary, and read at least one or two novels from among them. This will give you some idea of the thematic richness of those Indian but non-English novels and of how close to the soil the experience embodied in them is.

Please also remember that though written in English, Indian writing in English forms part of Indian literature.

3. Introducing *The Shadow Lines*

Here is a novel that you will enjoy reading as I did. I talked to several readers of the novel and they all agreed that it was interesting—or in the language of today it was *an interesting read*. The reason to my mind is that the novel is full of stories, stories told by different characters, stories that suggest or lead to other stories, stories within stories within stories, making the novel a sort of a feast of network of stories. And we all like stories.

Every story has a point—it says something at the end. What do the stories in the novel say? What is the point of it? It is when you reach this stage that reading the novel becomes a serious exercise.

At one level *The Shadow Lines* is the story of Tridib who was the uncle of the narrator and his mentor from the time he (the narrator) was 8 and Tridib 29, his love for an English girl May and his death in the communal riots in Dhaka in 1964. The narrative however, does not come to a close in 1964, but continues till 1979 when the narrator comes back to India after a year's stay in England on a research grant. It was only in 1979—15 years after the Dhaka riots that he became mature enough to understand the connection between the Dhaka riots in 1964 and the Calcutta riots that followed soon after and also the true meaning of Tridib's death. The novel thus not only tells the story of Tridib but also the story of the growth and maturity of the narrator himself. It is, to use a German word, a *bildungsroman*, a growing up novel.

The Shadow Lines also raises issues of freedom and nationalism and borders and will compel you to rethink some of your ideas on these issues.

4. Questions to Ask :

As you read the novel, you could ask the following questions:

1. What is the chief concern of Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines*? Or, what are his chief concerns in it?
2. Who does the novel deal with? Indians? The English? Pakistanis? Bangladeshis? Who else?
3. What relationships does the writer give prominence to?
4. Who is the narrator in the novel? Is there more than one storyteller in it? Who are they?
5. What different subjects does the novel talk about?
6. What do you make of the title of the novel – *The Shadow Lines*?

I am sure you will find yourself asking many more questions as you will read along.

5. Background :

5.1 Amitav Ghosh and His Works : A Brief Note

Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta in 1956 and spent his childhood there and also in Dhaka and Colombo. He studied at the St. Stephen's College, Delhi, and went to take a D. Phil in Social Anthropology at Oxford.

He has taught at the Delhi School of Economics, Delhi University, and has also been a Visiting

Professor at Columbia University and Virginia University in America.

His anthropological interests took him to the Alexandria University and to the villages of Egypt. These interests are reflected in some of his works, most of all *In an Antique Land* (1992), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) and *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* (1998).

His first novel *The Circle of Reason* came out in 1986, for which he won the French prestigious literary award, the *Prix Medici Estrange*. The Sahitya Akademi Award came to him in 1989 after the publication of *The Shadow Lines* in 1988.

5.2 Partition

There have been two cataclysmic events in Indian history—the Mutiny in 1857 and the partition of the country in 1947.

Freedom for India came with partition of the country in 1947. And partition came because the All India Muslim League led by M. A. Jinnah wanted a homeland for Muslims on the basis of what they called the two-nation theory. The two-nation theory meant that there was not one nation in India—a position held by the Indian National Congress but that there were two nations—Hindus and Muslims. This led to the creation of Pakistan carved out of the Muslim-majority provinces of Sind, NWFP and Baluchistan and the Muslim majority areas of Punjab and Bengal. Punjab became West Punjab and East Punjab, and Bengal became East Bengal and West Bengal, with West Punjab and East Bengal going over to Pakistan.

In 1971 the East Pakistan wing broke away from Pakistan and emerged as Bangladesh under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. This further division called in question the two-nation theory on the basis of which Pakistan had been formed. Apparently, apart from other things, ethnicity and culture proved a far stronger force than religion. Partition meant shedding of a great deal of blood and destruction of all kinds on both sides of the border. In Punjab it also meant mass uprooting and transfer of population from West Punjab to East Punjab and vice versa. The situation in Bengal was however different. Here the migration took place in trickles and it occurred either because of communal violence or discrimination or insecurity or because of preference for living in a secular state. According to historian Leonard A. Gordon, there were about 1 million Hindus in Bangladesh in 1978 and the number has been declining.

5.3 The Ideas of Nation and Nationalism and Nation State

The word *nation* comes from a root that means *be born*. According to the Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary, a *nation* is a community of people of mainly common descent, history, language etc. forming a state or inhabiting a territory. This definition is helpful to some extent but we need to be more precise and we need to identify the elements that go into the making of a nation.

What is a Nation?

Ernest Renan, a French scholar, wrote an essay “What is a nation?” in 1882, which is still helpful in clarifying our ideas about what constitutes a nation.

Renan begins by recounting the elements that are **not** essential to nation making. According to him, race, language and religion are not essential to a nation. Race originally crucial is becoming increasingly less important. Also, language, though it invites people to unite, does not force them to do so. Likewise religion, he says, cannot supply an adequate basis for the constitution of a modern nation either. What about community of interests? A community of interests in his view does not suffice to make a nation. Nationality has a sentimental side to it: “it is both soul and body.” Similarly the writer dismisses the claim of geography to nation making: “The soil furnishes the substructure, the field of struggle and of labour, man furnishes the soul. Man is everything in the formation of this sacred thing, which is called a people.... A nation is a spiritual principle.... It is a spiritual family not a group determined by the shape of the earth.”

According to Renan, two things are necessary to constitute this spiritual principle—the past and the present. “One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the

desire to live together.” A nation, he says, must have a common fund of memories of triumph, or glory or of endeavours or of sacrifices. To have common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more—these are the essential conditions for being a people.”

Even more valuable than triumphs are memories of having suffered together for shared sufferings, he says, unify more than joy does and because they impose duties and require a common effort.

Towards the end of the essay, Renan says that human will on which a nation depends changes. So “nations are not something eternal. They had their beginnings and they will end. A European confederation will very probably replace them” [the European nations]. For the moment, however, the existence of nations is a good thing for it is “the guarantee of liberty, which would be lost if the world had only one law and only one master.”

To sum up, according to Renan, race, language, religion, material interests and geography are not essential to create a nation. On the other hand a nation shares memories of a common past, of triumphs and glory and endeavour and sacrifices and even more so memories of common sufferings and griefs. Finally a nation must desire to live and work together.

This is what Renan said. What you should do is to see how far his ideas are applicable to India—where you agree with him and where you don't. Also consider this question – Do we need to move beyond the nation? Do we need to abolish all frontiers and move towards the idea of internationalism, of universal brotherhood? If so, how can we do it?

Nationalism

The related term *nationalism* also needs some attention. Nationalism can simply be defined as patriotic feelings or principles; love and pride in a country showed by its people; desire of people to form an independent country.

A spirit of nationalism is essential if a country has to achieve independence or to remain united but it can easily run to excess and assume a form that permits no compromises. *Chauvinism* is one such form and it means a very great and often blind admiration of one's country. This blind admiration goes with the belief that one's country is politically, morally and militarily better than all others. An extreme form of nationalism is *jingoism* which means patriotism that has a military tendency in it. What separates jingoism from patriotism is that it owes its allegiance to soil and territory but not to the people living on it.

Nation – State

Another related term is *nation-state* which means a nation living together as one politically independent state. India for instance is a nation-state. In Europe nation states began to develop in the 13th century. Now their boundaries are fixed and settled and they are moving towards the idea of a confederation with a common currency called Euro. As Professor A. N. Kaul has pointed out in his brilliant essay, “A Reading of *The Shadow Lines*”, a number of modern western scholars have viewed nationalism negatively. One of them, Ernest Gellner says: “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist” (SL 301). This negative view of nationalism arose around the time of the Second World War in the face of the rise of imperial nationalism in Germany, Italy and Japan.

Moving beyond the nation and owing your loyalty to the idea of a universal brotherhood or cosmopolitan answer is a laudable ideal. But the question that we have to ask is: What do we Indians do—we who are still in the process of nation building? We still need to unify and consolidate and work together as a nation before we can think of abolishing national borders and move into the paradise of internationalism. So healthy unaggressive nationalism is our priority. Do you agree?

Think of these ideas yourself and discuss them with your friends, particularly in the context of what Amitav Ghosh says in the novel.

6. A Note on the Text Used:

In this study material we have used the paperback educational edition of *The Shadow Lines* published by the Oxford University Press, Delhi. Besides giving the complete text, it has the advantage of giving you four critical essays on the novel by Professor A.N. Kaul, Professor Meenakshi Mukherjee, Dr. Suvir Kaul and Dr. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan. You should find these essays useful.

7. Further Reading:

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Shadow Lines* With critical essays by A.N. Kaul, Suvir Kaul, Meenakshi Mukherjee and Rajeswari Rajan 1988; New Delhi: OUP, 1995; rpt. 1998.

- *The Circle of Reason*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal. 1986.

- *In An Antique Land*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1992

- *The Calcutta Chromosome*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1996

- *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1998.

Renan, Ernest "What is a nation?" Trans. Martin Thom, in *Nation and Narration* Ed. Homi K. Bhabha. London: Routledge, 1990, pp. 8-22.

Beteille, Andre. "Historical Fortunes: The Relevance of the Nation-state," *Times of India*, 9.1.14.

Dhawan, R.K. Ed. *The Novels of Amitav Ghosh*. New Delhi: Prestige, 1999. Contains ten essays exclusively on *The Shadow Lines*.

PART II : THE NARRATIVE IN *THE SHADOW LINES*

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1. Introduction
2. The Story
3. Narrative Technique

1. Introduction

While reading a novel it is not only important to know what it is about but also how the author has organized the narrative in it. The story or the events that make up the story are important but the manner in which they are told is equally important and determines the total effect of the narrative. Some questions to ask of any narrative are:

1. Who tells the story? Who is the narrator?
2. From whose point of view is the story told?
3. To whom is the story told?
4. Who speaks when? Does the narrator tell his story at the time at which events occur? Or does he tell the story after the events are over and he looks back on the entire sequence?

Answers to these questions are important in order to understand any novel or story or indeed any narrative.

2. The Story

But first let us get the bare facts of the story straight. The story revolves round two families—one Indian, the other English.

At the core of the Indian family are two sisters Mayadebi and her elder sister who remains unnamed and who is the narrator's grandmother. The sisters originally belonged to Dhaka where they lived in a joint family presided over by their father and his elder brother Jethmoshai.

The elder of the two sisters got married to a railway engineer in Burma four years before Mayadebi. Her husband died in 1935 making it necessary for his widow to start working as a school teacher. Her son, the narrator's father, was a junior engineer in a rubber company. She was a stern woman who had worked hard to educate her son and who did not want her grandson to waste time. For this reason she did not want him to keep her sister's son Tridib's company who she thought was a waster. She was a firm nationalist and recalled how as a college girl she had been surprised to discover that a quiet classmate of hers was a revolutionary. He had been given the task of killing an English magistrate and the police were looking for him. Given the opportunity she would have killed him : "It was for our freedom : I would have done anything to be free" (SL, 39).

Later she donated her gold chain given to her by her husband for the war fund during the India-Pakistan war of 1965.

Mayadebi was married to Mr. Himangshushekhari Datta-Chaudhuri who was in the Indian Foreign Service. They had three sons, Jatin who became a UN economist, Tridib 2 years younger than Jatin, and Robi, much younger who later on joined the IAS.

Mayadebi's father-in-law Justice Chandrashakher Datta-Chaudhuri had been a judge of the Calcutta High Court. His interest in spiritualism had brought him in contact with an Englishman called Lionel Tresawson who did business in Calcutta. He had a son Alan and a daughter Elisabeth who married a man who had taught her in college, S.N. I. Price. Mrs. Elisabeth Price had two children Nick and May.

When in 1939 Mrs. Price heard that her father's friend's son Mr. Himangshushekhhar Datta-Chudhuri was ill and was planning to visit England, she wrote to them to come and stay with her. Accordingly, Mayadebi, her husband and her son Tridib went to England during the war and stayed with Mrs. Price for a year.

Details of Events :

The narrator and Jatin's daughter Ila were of the same age and had been childhood playmates and the narrator fancied her. Since Ila's parents were in foreign service, her visits to Calcutta were few and far between. But the narrator avidly looked forward to her visits and continued to fancy her. She studied in different schools abroad and would show him the albums of photographs of different schools and her friends. In 1960 her father was on a sabbatical leave from his job at the UN and taught in a university in the north of England and she and her mother stayed with Mrs. Price in London. During Durga Puja holidays Ila came to Calcutta and took the narrator to the old family house in Raibazar and played a game called Houses with him just as she played the game with Nick in London (SL, 49). In London she attended school along with Mrs. Price's son Nick. Apparently this brought her closer to Nick. Later she studied at the University College in London doing B. A. History.

Ila had become fashionable and free in her manners. During one of her visits to Calcutta she persuaded the narrator and her uncle Robi to go to the Grand Hotel and shocked her uncle by offering to dance with complete strangers there. When the incensed Robi knocked the men down, Ila greatly resented his interference saying: "I'll do what I bloody well want, when I want and where." And later she openly declared that she lived in London because "I want to be free" (SL,88). When the narrator told his disciplinarian grandmother Ila's reasons for staying in London, she called her 'a whore' saying that she wanted to be left alone to do what she pleased.

The narrator's hopes in Ila were disappointed when after a Christmas party, they both [the narrator and Ila] had to stay together overnight in a cellar in Mrs. Price's house and Ila told him that she had always thought of him as a brother. Ila ended up by marrying Nick.

May was a tiny baby in 1939-40 when Tridib had stayed with Mrs. Price along with his parents. In 1959 he started a regular correspondence with May. His fourth letter to her described an erotic meeting between a man and a woman, complete strangers who made love to each other in a ruined cinema house during the war. Tridib wrote that he too wanted to meet her as a stranger in a ruin and that "if that was to happen she would have to come to India. They would find a place like that somewhere; he was an expert on ruins" (SL,144).

Later she came to Calcutta on a visit and stayed with the narrator's family. When she went out with Tridib, the narrator accompanied them. One morning they all went out to see the Queen Victoria Memorial. It was during this visit that May acknowledged her love for Tridib. "This is our ruin; that's what we've been looking for," he said. "Yes," she said, "This will do for our ruin" (SL,170; italics in the original). On another occasion they went to see the Diamond Harbour. On the way May spied an injured dog lying in the middle of the road. She asked Tridib to stop the car, went back to where the dog lay and in spite of Tridib's objections put an end to the dog's suffering by mercykilling it. At this Tridib asked her to promise him to do the same service for him if he should ever need it.

On 2nd Jan. 1964, May accompanied Tridib and the narrator's grandmother and Robi to Dhaka. The narrator's grandmother had learnt of an old relative of hers, her father's elder brother who was still in Dhaka. Mayadebi's husband happened to have been posted at Dhaka and both the grandmother and Mayadebi decided to rescue the old man. In Dhaka the two sisters went to their old house now occupied by refugees from India. There was tension in the city because of the possibility of communal trouble that particular day. But they still went. The narrator's grandmother was particularly excited for she was "going home" as a widow for the first time. When they reached the old house, they found that Khalil, a rickshaw puller, and his family were looking after Jethamoshai out of their meagre earnings. When they told the old man of their intentions, he refused to budge. He said he was born there and would

die there (SL,215). When they failed to persuade him to go, they thought of another way. Khalil would bring him in his rickshaw on the pretext of going to the court and would follow the car. But the car had not gone very far when it was stopped and attacked by a mob. The security guard travelling in the car somehow managed to scare the people away. At this they turned their attention to the rickshaw and surrounded it. The narrator's grandmother shouted to the driver to drive away but May insisted on going to the rescue of the old man and ran towards the rickshaw. When Tridib saw her running, he rushed after her and fell upon the rioters. Within minutes Tridib was killed along with Jethamoshai and Khalil. Since the narrator had not gone with his grandmother and Tridib and Robi to Dhaka, he got to know the details of the incidents leading to Tridib's death from Robi and May.

Parallel to the communal trouble in Dhaka in January 1964 there was communal trouble in Calcutta. One day the narrator as a 12 year old boy waited for the school bus. The bus came but there were only about a dozen boys in it. He thought that other boys had stayed back to listen to the commentary on the Test match between India and England being played at Madras. His Muslim friend Mantu too had not come. The boys told him that it was rumoured that the whole supply of water in the city had been poisoned.

It was only 15 years later when he heard the full details of Tridib's death that he saw the connection between the riots in Dhaka and the subsequent riots in Calcutta. He made this discovery accidentally in 1979 in the air-conditioned room in the Teen Murti Nehru Museum Library.

There was another incident that had happened in Srinagar just before the riots in Dhaka and Calcutta. The sacred relic—hair—of the Prophet Muhammad which had been stolen was recovered on 4 Jan. 1964. Both the loss and recovery of the relic were followed by mass demonstrations of dismay and joy respectively. But the incident of the loss led to riots in Khulna and elsewhere in East Pakistan and later in Calcutta.

The narrator met May twice, once in 1963 when she came in response to Tridib's letter. The second occasion came 17 years later when he had gone to England for a year to collect materials for his Ph. D. from the India office Library.

May used to play the oboe in an orchestra and lived by herself in Islington. Once when after a performance of her orchestra he met her, she at once recognized him and asked him to have dinner with her.

After Ila's marriage with Nick Mrs. Price gave a party at which the disappointed narrator drank excessively. Seeing his condition May took him to her own lodgings. In his drunkenness he tried to make sexual advances to May which she repulsed. Next morning, however, he apologized for his behaviour.

The narrator met May in London for the last time the evening before he was to return to India. In spite of how he had behaved earlier, she had invited him to dinner. During the dinner she wondered why he had never asked her how Tridib had died and then proceeded to tell him the story of his death from her point of view—how the narrator's grandmother asked the driver to drive away, how she shouted at the grandmother, how she ran towards the rickshaw, how Tridib followed her and pushed her aside and how the mob had surrounded the rickshaw. She was wracked with guilt believing that it was she who was responsible for Tridib's death and that he would not have got down the car if she hadn't made him to. But she later realized that Tridib had sacrificed himself and that to her a real sacrifice was a mystery.

May didn't want to be alone that night and asked the narrator to stay. Later they made love to each other. Their togetherness gave the narrator a glimpse of the mystery of love, "the final redemptive mystery," as he calls it.

3. Narrative Technique

The Shadow Lines is a memory novel. Here the narrator narrates the events from memory rather than as direct occurrences. All events have either happened to him or he has heard others tell of them. But everything comes to us through the narrator's memory. Which means that the narrator disregarding chronology proceeds according to what preoccupies him at the moment — one memory takes him to another, irrespective of when the actual event took place. We shall take an example.

The novel begins after all the events are over with the narrator writing a sentence in the manner of an omniscient narrator.

"In 1939 thirteen years before I was born, my father's aunt, Mayadebi went to England with her husband and her son, Tridib." (SL, 3)

The narrator then immediately switches back to the time when he was eight. The choice of this point of time appears natural because that was Tridib's age too when he had gone to England and Tridib was his mentor and role model and also because that was when he had tried to get him [Tridib] to tell the story of his visit to England. Tridib's love for gossiping with street corner acquaintances is mentioned, which leads to his telling them of English relatives of theirs, particularly Mrs. Price and her daughter May, whom, he said, he had recently visited. When the narrator, a child of 8, tries to correct Tridib, no one believes him.

The mention of May makes the narrator move fast forward to the second of his two meetings with May in 1979 when he goes to England to collect material for his Ph.D. May tells him how in 1959 Tridib had initiated a correspondence with her and they had like pen friends exchanged photographs. This means that Tridib in telling his listeners about his 'recent' visit to England had taken them for a ride and that he had described May's physical appearance graphically because he had let his imaginative work round the photograph she had sent him.

From May the narrator moves briefly back to his grandmother in 1960 only to say how wrong she was in her dismissal of Tridib as a lover of gossip and that he was actually a recluse and a book lover.

Ila his niece did not agree with him on his estimate of Tridib. This leads the narrator to Ila when they were 16 (in 1968) – it was then that they had talked about Tridib's habits.

From the above you can see that starting in the present the narrator moves back to 1960 when he was 8 and then to 1979 and then goes back to 1968. These time switches often take place unannounced and demand an alert reader who must be able to identify the subject that preoccupies the narrator at any given point of time.

A characteristic feature of the narration is that an important event is hardly ever narrated at one go—it comes in instalments. The cellar/underground room scene in the old Rajbajar house is a case in point. Ila is staying with her mother with Mrs. Price in her London house. She has come to Calcutta for Puja holidays and both she and the narrator who are childhood playmates go to the underground room and play Houses under the vast table just as she played houses with Nick in Mrs. Price's cellar (SL, 69). The mention of Nick's name rings the first alarm bell in the narrator. Later it is in the cellar that the narrator, now an adult, discovers Ila's love for Nick (SL, 112). Again it is here that Ila later confesses to the narrator Nick's infidelity (SL, 187). In other words, as Prof. A.N. Kaul has pointed out, the fragmented narration of these cellar scenes is spread, back and forth, over the length of the novel. What is the point of this fragmented narration? The narrative with its time switches is an attempt on the part of the narrator to understand and make sense of his experience. The narrative is thus also the story of the narrator's growth and maturity.

How is the Narrative Organized?

There are two major events that focus the narrative—the visit to Dhaka and the subsequent death of Tridib, and the lovemaking between the narrator and May before he starts for home from England.

The narrative is in two parts—entitled **Going Away** and **Coming Home**. The second part specifically concerns on to the two important events mentioned above. The first part—**Going Away** though not so focussed is a systematic build-up and prepare us for the second part of the novel. It is concerned with the major figures in the narrator's life—his stern grandmother, his uncle Tridib, May, but most of all his niece Ila and through Ila with Nick. We get a close glimpse of Ila at different stages of her life, Ila as a playmate in Calcutta, Ila at Colombo, Ila at international schools, Ila in London as a child and as an adult, Ila's early fascination for Nick and the narrator's for her and his ultimate disappointment in Mrs. Price's cellar as she

goes to join Nick leaving him conscious of the inequality of their needs. This prepares us for the narrator's later union with May.

Apart from the thematic unity there are other elements that help to bind the narrative together. One of these is the structural parallels/contrasts in the novel. A most obvious example is the ending of the two parts. Part One, much of which is concerned with Ila, ends with the narrator being disappointed in his most fervent hopes of winning her when she tells him that she has never thought of him as anything other than a brother. Part two on the other hand ends with the narrator finding love and fulfilment in the arms of May. The quester has come home.

Another example of a parallel is provided by what the narrator's grandmother says about freedom. In Part One she reminisces about a class fellow of hers at college who turned out to be a revolutionary. Asked if she would have killed the English magistrate that the revolutionary in her class was supposed to do, she replies, "Yes, I would have killed him. It was for our freedom" (SL, 39). In the second part during the 1965 war with Pakistan she donates her gold chain that she considered an essential part of herself for the war fund. Explaining the reason for the donation, she says, "I gave it away, she screamed. I gave it to fund for the war. I had to, don't you see? For your sake, for your freedom" (SL 237).

The two families the novel deals with also offer some parallels and contrasts. If Ila is a giddy flighty girl intent on living fully in the present and achieving freedom, she has a parallel in Nick who is similarly self-absorbed and who lives entirely for his pleasure. By contrast May is a sensitive character for whom past and past memories matter a great deal.

Since the author says that lines/borders/divisions are invented and arbitrary and that people everywhere are the same, he uses the metaphor of a mirror to enforce the idea of sameness. This applies to persons, events and situations.

The mirror image first appears on the opening page itself when the narrator imagines himself to be exactly like Tridib: "I had decided that he had looked like me" (SL, 3). This identification with Tridib could be seen as having been completed when the narrator makes love to May at the end of the novel. Ever since Ila introduced the name of Nick as her playmate in London, he has been a spectral presence and adversary to the narrator: "After that day Nick Price... became a spectral presence beside me in my looking glass; growing with me, but always bigger and better, and in some way more desirable" (SL, 50). Later on when he met him in London, he turned out to be of the same size as he was (p.55). The Magda doll with blue eyes and golden hair is also the mirror image of Ila with which she identifies herself completely, minus the racially inferior features (SL, 73).

The author uses the mirror image not only for private memories but for public events too. For example the Second World War of 1939 glimpsed in Part One has its analogue in the communal clashes in Dhaka and Calcutta in 1964 and Indo-Pak war in 1965. The war time atmosphere on both sides in England and Germany was the same—it was one of exhilaration. When Mayadebi pointed this out saying that she has "been able to watch England coming alive," Alan Tresawan laughed: "People don't believe me, he said, but it's the same over there—in Germany... It was odd coming back here—like stepping through a looking-glass" (SL, 66). When the narrator tries to see some connection between the Calcutta riots and the Dhaka riots in 1964 he again resorts to the mirror image: "...it took me *fifteen years* to discover that there was a connection between my nightmare bus ride back from school, and the events that befell Tridib and the others in Dhaka..." (SL, 218;). Again, "the simple fact that there has never been a moment in the four-thousand-year-old history of that map, when the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines—so closely that I, in Calcutta, had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka, a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free—our looking glass border" (SL, 232).

Look for other examples of the use of the mirror image, that help to hold the novel together.

PART III: THEME AND CHARACTERS IN *THE SHADOW LINES*

Contents:

1. Theme of Nationalism:
2. Brief Notes on Characters

1. Theme of Nationalism:

Amitav Ghosh announces his principal theme of nationalism and also his own attitude to it through the title of the book itself, *The Shadow Lines*. He distrusts nationalism as a destructive force that draws lines/divisions between people and nations and that is a source of terrifying violence. These lines, he believes, are arbitrary and inverted and illusory and have no business to be. As a corollary he enquires into the meaning of distance and also into how the nation-state expects the people living within it to relate to it.

The exploration is done at two levels, the personal and the public, with both coming together in the 1964 Dhaka riots in which Tridib, Ukil Babu and Khalil died.

Amitav Ghosh's treatment of the theme tends to be idealistic. According to him, it was perfectly possible for India and the British to interact at a personal level without any barriers whatever. He illustrates this by showing the contacts between two families located so far apart as in India and in England over three generations. Starting with the camaraderie between Justice Chandrashekar Datta-Chaudhuri and Lionel Tresawson in Calcutta in the late 19th century, the contacts continue in post-independent India in the form of visits to and from and climaxed by love between Tridib and May. Amitav Ghosh's ideal is contained in the Tristan-Iseult love story which Snipe had told Tridib in the cellar in 1939. The story, he says, happened everywhere, wherever you wish it. "It was an old story, the best story in Europe... when Europe was a better place, a place without borders and countries... it was the story of a hero called Tristan, a very sad story, about a man without a country who fell in love with a woman across the seas" (SL, 186). Tridib recalls the ideal calling May "my love, my own, true love, my love-across-the-seas" (SL, 175). And when he dies, the narrator for whom Tridib is a role model finds love and fulfilment in the arm of May. Interpersonal relations find their perfection in love.

The issue of interpersonal between people across the nations is however more complicated than is suggested by the writer's presentation of it. Amitav Ghosh himself hints at the complexities posed by racism by giving two examples. In one an Irishman Mike who is a visitor in Mrs. Price's house during World War II insultingly asks their guest Shaheb if he had killed any Englishmen yet. When the Shaheb retreats in horror, Mike replies: "So what makes you Indian then?" (SL, 63). Later, during Ila and her mother's stay at Mrs. Price's house in the sixties, we are told how on one occasion Nick had run away from Ila leaving her to face racial insults from white children (SL, 75). But these examples are only hints and don't affect the writer's romantic view of the perfectibility of personal relations across the nations. The writer appears to be so committed to the ideal of a world society without national borders that he appears to have decided to overlook the complexities that can bedevil such relations.

This is reflected in the lesson that the narrator has learnt.

I was a child, and like all the children around me, I grew up
believing in the truth of the precepts that were available to me: I
believed in the reality of space; I believed that distance separates, I
believed in the reality of nations and borders; I believed that across

the border there existed another reality. The only relationship my vocabulary permitted between those separate realities was war or friendship. There was no room in it for this other thing.

(SL, 218-19)

This is a key statement of the book because it expresses the narrator's—and the writer's—distrust of nationalism and his faith in cosmopolitanism. The use of the past tense indicates that it is thus a clear repudiation of his earlier beliefs in the reality of nations and borders, beliefs that had been shaped under the influence of his grandmother and her brand of aggressive nationalism.

The author drives home his point by choosing as the end points of his essential narrative two events both of which are violent and which result from aggressive nationalism. He begins his narrative in 1939 which marks the beginning of World War II and it essentially ends in 1964 when the tragic riots occurred in Dhaka. But surely all nationalism need not be equally destructive. Nationalism can slide into chauvinism and even into jingoism. And when that happens, nationalism as embodied in a nation-state can become an instrument of suppression and can kill the very freedom which it was meant to secure in the first place. Amitav Ghosh is also right in warning us of the tendency of nation-states to try to claim the exclusive loyalty of its people: "...independent relationship is the natural enemy of government, for it is the logic of states that to exist at all they must claim the monopoly of all relationships between peoples" (SL, 230). For the state there are only citizens, not people. But to equate all kinds of nationalism with chauvinism and to overlook the role of nationalism in securing freedom for enslaved people is a little too simplistic. The West can afford to move beyond nationalism because it has experienced the worst form of nationalism and also because its borders are fixed. But there are countries where freedom has come more recently and which are still in the process of consolidating their national identity. Borders or lines constitutes the reality of life in the modern world whether we want them or not and we need to negotiate this reality if we are to move anywhere at all.

2. Brief Notes on Characters

Tridib - is a young intellectual who lives intensely with the help of his imagination and who teaches his nephew to do likewise.

The narrator's grandmother - is a strong character who is a strict disciplinarian and who is also a fervent nationalist.

As a college girl she had admired a young revolutionary in her class and would have been prepared to kill if necessary for freedom. And in the 1965 war with Pakistan she donates her precious gold chain to the war fund, again for freedom. Essentially it is her nationalistic spirit that induces her to go to Dhaka to bring her uncle to safety.

As a widow she has lived a hard life earning a living as a school teacher and educating a son and later her grandson, the narrator. She is a most potent influence on the narrator, an influence which he repudiates at the end. She judges Ila harshly for her free ways going to the extent of calling her a whore.

Ila belongs to a generation of young Indians who were born immediately after independence and who had the means to go across the seas and live life as they wanted to.

She is hung upon Mrs. Price's son Nick and marries him and though

distressed by his infidelities cannot bring herself to leave him. Her cosmopolitanism appears superficial.

The narrator

- a young man who looks up to his uncle Tridib as a mentor and role model.
- He grows up to realize the illusory nature of lines/divisions between peoples and nations.
- He has fancied his niece and his playmate, Ila from childhood and is heart-broken when she prefers Nick. In the end he finds love and fulfilment in the arms of May.

May

- is a mature young girl whose compassion extends to all including animals. Likewise her sympathies extend to all people irrespective of the country of their origin. She represents cosmopolitanism and humanness at its best.
- She feels guilty at having induced Tridib to leave the safety of the car and rush into the midst of a mob to rescue a defenceless old man. But she consoles herself with the thought that what Tridib did was to sacrifice himself and that any real sacrifice is mystery.

Nick

- is a very ordinary young Englishman for whom Ila takes a strong fancy. He is disinclined to exert himself and earn a dignified living for himself and his wife Ila.

Note: These are six most important characters in the novel. Please treat these notes as outlines and develop them into full-length character sketches on the basis of a close reading of the novel.

Ernest Renan

(Translated and annotated by Martin Thom)

What I propose to do today is to analyse with you an idea which, though seemingly clear, lends itself to the most dangerous misunderstandings. (Consider) the vast agglomerations of men found in China, Egypt or ancient Babylonia, the tribes of the Hebrews and the Arabs, the city as it existed in Athens or Sparta, the assemblies of the various territories in the Carolingian Empire, those communities which are without a *patrie*² and are maintained by a religious bond alone, as is the case with the Israelites and the Parsees, nations, such as France, England and the majority of the modern European sovereign states, confederations, such as exist in Switzerland or in America, and ties, such as those that race, or rather language, establishes between the different branches of the German or Slav peoples. Each of these groupings exist, or have existed and there would be the direst of consequences if one were to confuse any one of them with any other. At the time of the French Revolution, it was commonly believed that the institutions proper to small, independent cities, such as Sparta and Rome, might be applied to our large nations which number some thirty or forty million souls. Nowadays, a far graver mistake is made : race is confused with nation and a sovereignty analogous to that of really existing peoples is attributed to ethnographic or rather linguistic groups.

I want now to try and make these difficult questions somewhat more precise, for the slightest confusion regarding the meaning of words, a start of an argument, may in the end lead to the most fatal of errors. It is a delicate thing that I propose to do here, somewhat akin to vivisection; I am going to treat the living much as one ordinarily treats the dead. I shall adopt an absolutely cool and impartial attitude.

I

Since the fall of the Roman Empire or, rather, since the disintegration of Charlemagne's empire, western Europe has seemed to us to be divided into nations, some of which, in certain epochs, have sought to wield hegemony over the others, without ever enjoying any lasting success. It is hardly likely that anyone in the future will achieve what Charles V, Louis XIV and Napoleon I failed to do. The founding of a new Roman Empire or of a new Carolingian empire would now be impossible. Europe is so divided that any bid for universal domination would very rapidly give rise to a coalition, which would drive any too ambitious nation back to its natural frontiers³. A kind of equilibrium has long been established. France, England, Germany and Russia will, for centuries to come, no matter what may befall them, continue to be individual historical units, the crucial pieces on a chequerboard whose squares will forever vary in importance and size but will never be wholly confused with each other.

Nations, in this sense of the term, are something fairly new in history. Antiquity was unfamiliar with them; Egypt, China and ancient Chaldea were in no way nations. They were flocks led by a Son of the Sun or by a Son of Heaven. Neither in Egypt nor in China were there citizens as such. Classical antiquity had republics, municipal kingdoms, confederations of local republics and empires, yet it can hardly be said to have had nations in our understanding of the term. Athens, Sparta, Tyre and Sidon were small centres imbued with the most admirable patriotism, but they were [simply] cities with a relatively restricted territory. Gaul, Spain and Italy, prior to their absorption by the Roman Empire, were collections of clans, which were often allied among themselves but had no central institutions and no dynasties. The Assyrian Empire, the Persian Empire and the empire of Alexander the Great were not *patries* either. There never were any Assyrian patriots, and the Persian Empire was nothing but a vast feudal structure. No nation traces its origins back to Alexander the Great's momentous adventure, fertile though it was in consequences for the general history of civilization.

The Roman Empire was much more nearly a *patrie*. Roman domination, although at first so harsh, was soon loved, for it had brought about the great benefit of putting an end to war. The empire was a huge

association, and a synonym for order, peace and civilization. In its closing stages, lofty souls, enlightened bishops, and the educated classes had a real sense of the *Pax Romana*, which withstood the threatening chaos of barbarism. But an empire twelve times larger than present-day France cannot be said to be a state in the modern sense of the term. The split between the eastern and western [empires] was inevitable, and attempts at founding an empire in Gaul, in the third century AD, did not succeed either. It was in fact the Germanic invasions which introduced into the world the principle which, later, was to serve as a basis for the existence of nationalities.

What in fact did the German peoples accomplish, from their great invasions in the fifth century AD up until the final Norman conquests in the tenth century? They effected little change in the racial stock, but they imposed dynasties and a military aristocracy upon the more or less extensive parts of the old empire of the west, which assumed the names of their invaders. This was the origin of France, Burgundy, and Lombardy, and, subsequently, Normandy. The Frankish Empire so rapidly extended its sway that, for a period, it re-established the unity of the west, but it was irreparably shattered around the middle of the ninth century, the partition of Verdun⁴ outlined divisions which were in principle immutable and, from then on, France, Germany, England, Italy, and Spain made their way, by often circuitous paths and through a thousand and one vicissitudes, to their full national existence, such as we see it blossoming today.

What in fact is the defining feature of these different states? It is the fusion of their component populations. In the above mentioned countries, there is nothing analogous to what you will find in Turkey, where Turks, Slavs, Greeks, Armenians, Arabs, Syrians, and Kurds are as distinct today as they were upon the day that they were conquered. Two crucial circumstances helped to bring about this result. First, the fact that the Germanic peoples adopted Christianity as soon as they underwent any prolonged contact with the Greek or Latin peoples. When conqueror or conquered have the same religion or, rather, when the conqueror adopts the religion of the conquered, the Turkish system – that is, the absolute distinction between men in terms of their religion – can no longer arise. The second circumstance was the forgetting, by the conquerors, of their own language. The grandsons of Clovis, Alaric, Gundebald, Alboin, and Roland were already speaking the Roman tongue. This fact was itself the consequence of another important feature, namely, the fact that the Franks, Burgundians, Goths, Lombards, and Normans had very few women of their own race with them. For several generations, the chiefs only married German women; but their concubines were Latin, as were the wet-nurses of their children; the tribe as a whole married Latin women; which meant that, from the time the Franks and the Goths established themselves on Roman territory, the *lingua francica* and the *lingua gothica* did not last too long.

This was not how it was in England, for the invading Saxons undoubtedly brought women with them; the Celtic population took flight, and, besides, Latin was no longer, or rather had never been, dominant in Britain. If Old French had been generally spoken in Gaul in the fifth century Clovis and his people would not have abandoned German for Old French.

The crucial result of all this was that, in spite of the extreme violence of the customs of the German invaders, the mould which they imposed became, with the passing centuries, the actual mould of the nation. 'France' became quite legitimately the name of a country to which only a virtually imperceptible minority of Franks had come. In the tenth century, in the first *chansons de geste*, which are such a perfect mirror of the spirit of the times, all the inhabitants of France are French. The idea which had seemed so obvious to Gregory of Tours⁵, that the population of France was composed of different races was in no way apparent to France writers and poets after Hugh Capet. The difference between noble and serf was as sharply drawn as possible, but it was in no sense presented as an ethnic difference; it was presented rather as a difference in courage, customs, and education, all of which were transmitted hereditarily; it did not occur to anyone that the origin of all this was a conquest. The spurious system according to which nobility owed its origin to a privilege conferred by the king for services rendered to the nation, so that every noble was an ennobled person, was established as a dogma as early as the thirteenth century. The same thing took place after almost all the Norman conquests. After one or two generations, the Norman invaders no longer distinguished themselves

from the rest of the population, although their influence was not any less profound because of this fact; they had given the conquered country a nobility, military habits, and a patriotism that they had not known before.

Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality. Indeed, historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations, even of those whose consequences have been altogether beneficial. Unity is always effected by means of brutality; the union of northern France with the Midi was the result of massacres and terror lasting for the best part of a century. Though the king of France was, if I may make so bold as to say, almost the perfect instance of an agent that crystallized [a nation] over a long period; though he established the most perfect national unity that there has ever been, too searching a scrutiny had destroyed his prestige. The nation which he had formed has cursed him, and, nowadays, it is only men of culture who know something of his former value and of his achievements.

It is [only] by contrast that these great laws of the history of western Europe become perceptible to us. Many countries failed to achieve what the King of France, partly through his tyranny, partly through his justice, so admirably brought to fruition. Under the Crown of Saint Stephen, the Magyars and the Slavs have remained as distinct as they were 800 years ago. Far from managing to fuse the diverse [ethnic] elements to be found in its domains, the House of Hapsburg has kept them distinct and often opposed the one to the other. In Bohemia [for instance], the Czech and German elements are superimposed, much like oil and water in a glass. The Turkish policy of separating nationalities according to their religion has had much graver consequences, for it brought about the downfall of the east. If you take a city such as Salonika or Smyrna, you will find there five or six communities each of which has its own memories and which have almost nothing in common. Yet the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things. No French citizen knows whether he is a Burgundian, an Alan, a Taifale, or a Visigoth, yet every French citizen has to have forgotten the massacre of Saint Bartholomew⁶, or the massacres that took place in the Midi in the thirteenth century. There are not ten families in France that can supply proof of their Frankish origin, and any such proof would anyway be essentially flawed, as a consequence of countless unknown alliances which are liable to disrupt any genealogical system.

The modern nation is therefore a historical result brought about by a series of convergent facts. Sometimes unity has been effected by a dynasty, as was the case in France; sometimes it has been brought about by the direct will of provinces, as was the case with Holland, Switzerland, and Belgium; sometimes it has been the work of a general consciousness, belatedly victorious over the caprices of feudalism, as was the case in Italy and Germany. These formations always had a profound *raison d'être*. Principles, in such cases, always emerge through the most unexpected surprises. Thus, in our own day, we have seen Italy unified through its defeats and Turkey destroyed by its victories. Each defeat advanced the cause of Italy; each victory spelled doom for Turkey; for Italy is a nation, and Turkey, outside of Asia Minor, is not one. France can claim the glory for having, through the French Revolution, proclaimed that a nation exists of itself. We should not be displeased if others imitate us in this. It was we who founded the principle of nationality. But what is a nation? Why is Holland a nation, when Hanover, or the Grand Duchy of Parma, are not? How is it that France continues to be a nation, when the principle which created it has disappeared? How is it 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? Why is Austria a state and not a nation? In what ways does the principle of nationality differ from that of races? These are points that a thoughtful person would wish to have settled, in order to put his mind at rest. The affairs of this world can hardly be said to be ruled by reasonings of this sort, yet diligent men are desirous of bringing some reason into these matters and of unravelling the confusions in which superficial intelligences are entangled.

II

If one were to believe some political theorists, a nation is above all a dynasty, representing an earlier conquest, one which was first of all accepted, and then forgotten by the mass of the people. According to the

above-mentioned theorists, the grouping of provinces effected by a dynasty, by its wars, its marriages, and its treaties, ends with the dynasty which had established it. It is quite true that the majority of modern nations were made by a family of feudal origin, which had contracted a marriage with the soil and which was in some sense a nucleus of centralization. France's frontiers in 1789 had nothing either natural or necessary about them. The wide zone that the House of Capet had added to the narrow strip of land granted by the partition of Verdun was indeed the personal acquisition of this House. During the epoch when these acquisitions were made, there was no idea of natural frontiers, nor of the right of nations, nor of the will of provinces. The union of England, Ireland and Scotland was likewise a dynastic fact. Italy only tarried so long before becoming a nation, because, among its numerous reigning houses none, prior to the present century, constituted itself as the centre of unity. Strangely enough, it was through the obscure island of Sardinia, a land that was scarcely Italian, that [the house of Savoy] assumed a royal title. Holland, which – through an act of heroic resolution— created itself, has nevertheless contracted an intimate marriage with the House of Orange, and it will run real dangers the day this union is compromised.

Is such a law, however, absolute? It undoubtedly is not. Switzerland and the United States, which have formed themselves, like conglomerates, by successive additions, have no dynastic basis. I shall not discuss this question in relation to France, for I would need to be able to read the secrets of the future in order to do so. Let me simply say that so loftily national had this great French royal principle been that, on the morrow of its fall, the nation was able to stand without her. Furthermore, the eighteenth century had changed everything. Man had returned, after centuries of abasement, to the spirit of antiquity, to [a sense of] respect for himself, to the idea of his own rights. The words *patrie* and citizen had recovered their former meanings. Thus it was that the boldest operation ever yet put into effect in history was brought to completion, an operation which one might compare with the attempt, in physiology, to restore to its original identity a body from which one had removed the brain and the heart.

It must therefore be admitted that a nation can exist without a dynastic principle, and even that nations which have been formed by dynasties can be separated from them without therefore ceasing to exist. The old principle, which only takes account of the right of princes, could no longer be maintained; apart from dynastic right, there is also national right. Upon what criterion, however, should one base this national right? By what sign should one know it? From what tangible fact can one derive it?

Several confidently assert that it is derived from race. The artificial divisions, resulting from feudalism, from princely marriages, from diplomatic congresses are, [these authors assert], in a state of decay. It is a population's race which remains firm and fixed. This is what constitutes a right, a legitimacy. The Germanic family, according to the theory I am expounding here, has the right to reassemble the scattered limbs of the Germanic order, even when these limbs are not asking to be joined together again. The right of the Germanic order over such-and-such a province is stronger than the right of the inhabitants of that province over themselves. There is thus created a kind of primordial right analogous to the divine right of kings; an ethnographic principle is substituted for a national one. This is a very great error, which, if it were to become dominant, would destroy European civilization. The primordial right of races is as narrow and as perilous for genuine progress as the national principle is just and legitimate.

In the tribes and cities of antiquity, the fact of race was, I will allow, of very real importance. The tribe and the city were then merely extensions of the family. At Sparta and at Athens all the citizens were kin to a greater or lesser degree. The same was true of the Beni-Israelites; this is still the case with the Arab tribes. If we move now from Athens, Sparta, and the Israelite tribe to the Roman Empire the situation is a wholly different one. Established at first through violence but subsequently preserved through [common] interest, this great agglomeration of cities and provinces, wholly different from each other, dealt the gravest of blows to the idea of race. Christianity, with its universal and absolute character, worked still more effectively in the same direction; it formed an intimate alliance with the Roman Empire and, through the impact of these two incomparable unificatory agents, the ethnographic argument was debarred from the government of human affairs for centuries.

The barbarian invasions were, appearances notwithstanding, a further step along this same path. The carving out of the barbarian kingdoms had nothing ethnographic about them, their [shape] was determined by the might or whim of the invaders. They were utterly indifferent to the race of the populations which they had subdued. What Rome had fashioned, Charlemagne refashioned in his own way, namely, a single empire composed of the most diverse races; those responsible for the partition of Verdun, as they calmly drew their two long lines from north to south, were not in the slightest concerned with the race of the peoples to be found on the right or left of these lines. Frontier changes put into effect, as the Middle Ages wore on, likewise paid no heed to ethnographic divisions. If the policies pursued by the House of Capet by and large resulted in the grouping together, under the name of France, of the territories of ancient Gaul, this was only because these lands had a natural tendency to be joined together with their fellows. Dauphine, Bresse, Provence, and Franche-Comte no longer recalled any common origin. All Gallic consciousness had perished by the second century AD, and it is only from a purely scholarly perspective that, in our own days, the individuality of the Gallic character has been retrospectively recovered.

Ethnographic considerations have therefore played no part in the constitution of modern nations. France is [at once] Celtic, Iberic, and Germanic. Germany is Germanic, Celtic and Slav. Italy is the country where the ethnographic argument is most confounded. Gauls, Etruscans, Pelasgians⁸ and Greeks, not to mention many other elements, intersect in an indecipherable mixture. The British isles, considered as a whole, present a mixture of Celtic and Germanic blood, the proportions of which are singularly difficult to define.

The truth is that there is no pure race and that to make politics depend upon ethnographic analysis is to surrender it to a chimera. The noblest countries, England, France and Italy, are those where the blood is the most mixed. Is Germany an exception in this respect? Is it a purely Germanic country? This is a complete illusion. The whole of the south was once Gallic; the whole of the east, from the river Elbe on, is Slav. Even those parts which are claimed to be really pure, are they in fact so? We touch here on one of those problems in regard to which it is of the utmost importance that we equip ourselves with clear ideas and ward off misconceptions.

Discussions of race are interminable, because philologically-minded historians and physiologically-minded anthropologists interpret the term in two totally different ways⁹. For the anthropologists, race has the same meaning as in zoology; it serves to indicate real descent, a blood relation. However, the study of language and of history does not lead to the same divisions as does physiology. Words such as brachycephalic or dolichocephalic have no place in either history or philology. In the human group which created the Aryan languages and way of life, there were already [both] brachycephalics and dolichocephalics. The same is true of the primitive group which created the languages and institutions known as Semitic. In other words, the zoological origins of humanity are massively prior to the origins of culture, civilization, and language. The primitive Aryan, primitive Semitic, and primitive Touranian groups had no physiological unity. These groupings are historical facts, which took place in a particular epoch, perhaps 15,000 or 20,000 years ago, while the zoological origin of humanity is lost in impenetrable darkness. What is known philologically and historically as the Germanic race is no doubt a quite distinct family within the human species, but is it a family in the anthropological sense of the term? Certainly not. The emergence of an individual Germanic identity occurred only a few centuries prior to Jesus Christ. One may take it that the Germans did not emerge from the earth at this epoch. Prior to this, mingled with the Slavs in the huge indistinct mass of the Scythians, they did not have their own separate individuality. An Englishman is indeed a type within the whole of humanity. However, the type of what is quite improperly called the Anglo-Saxon race¹⁰ is neither the Briton of Julius Caesar's time, nor the Anglo-Saxon of Hengist's time, nor the Dane of Canute's time, nor the Norman of William the Conqueror's time; it is rather the result of all these [elements]. A Frenchman is neither a Gaul, nor a Frank, nor a Burgundian. Rather, he is what has emerged out of the cauldron in which, presided over by the King of France, the most diverse elements have together been simmering. A native of Jersey or Guernsey differs in no way, as far as his origins are concerned, from the Norman population of the opposite coast. In the eleventh century, even the sharpest eye would have seen not the slightest difference in those living on either side of the

Channel. Trifling circumstances meant that Philip Augustus did not seize these islands together with the rest of Normandy. Separated from each other for the best part of 700 years, the two populations have become not only strangers to each other but wholly dissimilar. Race, as we historians understand it, is therefore something which is made and unmade. The study of race is of crucial importance for the scholar concerned with the history of humanity. It has no applications, however, in politics. The instinctive consciousness which presided over the construction of the map of Europe took no account of race, and the leading nations of Europe are nations of essentially mixed blood.

The fact of race, which was originally crucial, thus becomes increasingly less important. Human history is essentially different from zoology, and race is not everything, as it is among the rodents or the felines, and one does not have the right to go through the world fingering people's skulls, and taking them by the throat saying: 'You are of our blood; you belong to us!' Aside from anthropological characteristics, there are such things as reason, justice, the true, and the beautiful, which are same for all. Be on your guard, for this ethnographic politics is in no way a stable thing and, if today you use it against others, tomorrow you may see it turned against yourselves. Can you be sure that the Germans, who have raised the banner of ethnography so high, will not see the Slavs in their turn analyse the names of villages in Saxony and Lusatia, search for any traces of the Wiltzes or of the Obotrites, and demand recompense for the massacres and the wholesale enslavements that the Ottos inflicted upon their ancestors? It is good for everyone to know how to forget.

I am very fond of ethnography, for it is a science of rare interest; but, in so far as I would wish it to be free, I wish it to be without political application. In ethnography, as in all forms of study, systems change; this is the condition of progress. States' frontiers would then follow the fluctuations of science. Patriotism would depend upon a more or less paradoxical dissertation. One would come up to a patriot and say: 'You were mistaken; you shed your blood for such-and-such a cause; you believed yourself to be a Celt; not at all, you are a German.' Then ten years later, you will be told that you are a Slav. If we are not to distort science, we should exempt it from the need to give an opinion on these problems, in which so many interests are involved. You can be sure that, if one obliges science to furnish diplomacy with its first principles, one will surprise her many times in *flagrant de'lit*. She has better things to do; let us simply ask her to tell the truth.

What we have just said of race applies to language too. Language invites people to unite, but it does not force them to do so. The United States and England, Latin America and Spain, speak the same languages yet do not form single nations. Conversely, Switzerland, so well made, since she was made with the consent of her different parts, numbers three or four languages. There is something in man which is superior to language, namely, the will. The will of Switzerland to be united, in spite of the diversity of her dialects, is a fact of far greater importance than a similitude often obtained by various vexatious measures.

An honourable fact about France is that she has never sought to win unity of language by coercive measures. Can one not have the same sentiments and the same thoughts, and love the same things in different languages? I was speaking just now of the disadvantages of making international politics depend upon ethnography; they would be no less if one were to make it depend upon comparative philology. Let us allow the intriguing studies full freedom of discussion; let us not mix them up with matters which would undermine their serenity. The political importance attaching to languages derives from their being regarded as signs of race. Nothing could be more false. Prussia, where only German is spoken, spoke Slav a few centuries ago; in Wales, English is spoken; German and Spain speak the primitive dialects of *Alba Longa*; Egypt speak Arabic; there are countless other examples one could quote. Even if you go back to origins, similarity of language did not presuppose similarity of race. Consider, for example the proto-Aryan or proto-Semitic tribes there one found slaves speaking the same language as their masters, yet the slave was often enough a different race to that of his master. Let me repeat that these divisions of the Indo-European, Semitic, or other languages, created with such admirable sagacity by comparative philology, do not coincide with the divisions established by anthropology. Languages are historical formations, which tell us very little about the blood of those who speak them and which, in any case, could not shackle human liberty when it is a matter of deciding the family with which one unites oneself for life or for death.

This exclusive concern with language, like an excessive preoccupation with race, has its dangers and its drawbacks. Such exaggerations enclose one within a specific culture, considered as national; one limits oneself, one hems oneself in. One leaves the heady air that one breathes in the vast field of humanity in order to enclose oneself in a conventicle with one's compatriots. Nothing could be worse for the mind; nothing could be more disturbing for civilization. Let us not abandon the fundamental principle that man is a reasonable and moral being, before he is cooped up in such and such a language, before he is a member of such and such a race, before he belongs to such and such a culture. Before French, German, or Italian culture there is human culture. Consider the great men of the Renaissance; they were neither French, nor Italian, nor German. They had rediscovered, through their dealings with antiquity, the secret of the genuine education of the human spirit, and they devoted themselves to it body and soul. What an achievement theirs was!

Religion cannot supply an adequate basis for the constitution of a modern nationality either. Originally, religion had to do with the very existence of the social group, which was itself an extension of the family. Religion and the rites were family rites. The religion of Athens was the cult of Athens itself, of its mythical founders, of its laws and its customs; it implied no theological dogma. This religion was, in the strongest sense of the term, a state religion. One was not an Athenian if one refused to practise it. This religion was, fundamentally, the cult of the Acropolis personified. To swear on the altar of Aglauros¹¹ was to swear that one would die for the *patrie*. This religion was the equivalent of what the act of drawing lots [for military service], or the cult of the flag, is for us. Refusing to take part in such a cult would be the equivalent, in our modern societies, of refusing military service. It would be like declaring that one was not Athenian. From another angle, it is clear that such a cult had no meaning for someone who was not from Athens; there was also no attempt made to proselytize foreigners and to force them to accept it; the slaves of Athens did not practise it. Things were much the same in a number of small medieval republics. One was not considered a good Venetian if one did not swear by Saint Mark; nor a good Amalfitan if one did not set Saint Andrew higher than all the other saints in paradise. In these small societies, what subsequently was regarded as persecution or tyranny was legitimate and was of no more consequence than our custom of wishing the father of a family happy birthday or a Happy New Year.

The state of affairs in Sparta and in Athens already no longer existed in the kingdoms which emerged from Alexander's conquest, still less in the Roman Empire. The persecutions unleashed by Antiochus Epiphanes in order to win the east for the cult of Jupiter Olympus, those of the Roman Empire designed to maintain a supposed state religion were mistaken, criminal and absurd. In our own time, the situation is perfectly clear. There are no longer masses that believe in a perfectly uniform manner. Each person believes and practises in his own fashion what he is able to and as he wishes. There is no longer a state religion; one can be French, English, or German, and be either Catholic, Protestant, or orthodox Jewish, or else practise no cult at all. Religion has become an individual matter; it concerns the conscience of each person. The division of nations into Catholics and Protestants no longer exists. Religion, which, fifty-two years ago, played so substantial a part in the formation of Belgium, preserves all of its [former] importance in the inner tribunal of each; but it has ceased almost entirely to be one of the elements which serve to define the frontiers of peoples.

A community of interest is assuredly a powerful bond between men. Do interests, however, suffice to make a nation? I do not think so. Community of interest brings about trade agreements, but nationality has a sentimental side to it; it is both soul and body at once; a Zollverien¹² is not a *patrie*.

Geography, or what are known as natural frontiers, undoubtedly plays a considerable part in the division of nations. Geography is one of the crucial factors in history. Rivers have led races on; mountains have brought them to a halt. The former have favoured movement in history, whereas the latter have restricted it. Can one say, however, that as some parties believe, a nation's frontiers are written on the map and that this nation has the right to judge what is necessary to round off certain contours, in order to reach such and such a mountain and such and such a river, which are thereby accorded a kind of a *priori* limiting faculty? I know

of no doctrine which is more arbitrary or more fatal, for it allows one to justify any or every violence. First of all, is it the mountains or the rivers that we should regard as forming these so-called natural frontiers? It is indisputable that the mountains separate, but the rivers tend rather to unify. Moreover, all mountains cannot divide up states. Which serve to separate and which do not? From Biarritz 'to Tornea, there is no one estuary which is more suited than any other to serving as a boundary marker. Had history so decreed it, the Loire, the Seine, the Meuse, the Elbe, or the Oder could, just as easily as the Rhine, have had this quality of being a natural frontier, such as has caused so many infractions of the most fundamental right, which is men's will. People talk of strategic grounds, Nothing, however, is absolute; it is quite clear that many concessions should be made to necessity. But these concessions should not be taken too far. Otherwise, everybody would lay claim to their military conveniences, and one would have unceasing war. No, it is no more soil than it is race which makes a nation. The soil furnishes the substratum, the field of struggle and of labour; man furnishes the soul. Man is everything in the formation of this sacred thing which is called a people. Nothing [purely] material suffices for it. A nation is a spiritual principle, the outcome of the profound complications of history; it is a spiritual family not a group determined by the shape of the earth. We have now seen what things are not adequate for the creation of such a spiritual principle, namely, race, language, material interest, religious affinities, geography, and military necessity. What more then is required? As a consequence of what was said previously, I will not have to detain you very much longer.

III

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. Man, Gentlemen, does not improvise. The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice, and devotion. Of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate, for the ancestors have made us what we are. A heroic past, great men, glory (by which I understand genuine glory), this is the social capital upon which one bases a national idea. To have common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more — these are the essential conditions for being a people. One loves in proportion to the sacrifices to which one has consented, and in proportion to the ills that one has suffered. One loves the house that one has built and that one has handed down. The Spartan song — 'We are what you were; we will be what you are'¹³ — is, in its simplicity, the abridged hymn of every *patrie*.

More valuable by far than common customs posts and frontiers conforming to strategic ideas is the fact of sharing, in the past, a glorious heritage and regrets, and of having, in the future, [a shared] programme to put into effect, or the fact of having suffered, enjoyed, and hoped together. These are the kinds of things that can be understood in spite of differences of race and language. I spoke just now of 'having suffered together' and, indeed, suffering in common unifies more than joy does. Where national memories are concerned, griefs are of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties, and require a common effort.

A nation is therefore a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future. It presupposes a past; it is summarized, however, in the present by a tangible fact, namely, consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life. A nation's existence is, if you will pardon the metaphor, a daily plebiscite, just as an individual's existence is a perpetual affirmation of life. That, I know full well, is less metaphysical than divine right and less brutal than so-called historical right. According to the ideas that I am outlining to you, a nation has no more right than a king does to say to a province: 'You belong to me, I am seizing you'. A province, as far as I am concerned, is its inhabitants; if anyone has the right to be consulted in such an affair, it is the inhabitant. A nation never has any real interest in annexing or holding on to a country against its will. The wish of nations is, all in all, the sole legitimate criterion, the one to which one must always return.

We have driven metaphysical and theological abstractions out of politics. What then remains? Man, with his desires and his needs. The secession, you will say to me, and, in the long term, the disintegration of

nations will be the outcome of a system which places these old organisms at the mercy of wills which are often none too enlightened. It is clear that, in such matters, no principle must be pushed too far. Truths of this order are only applicable as a whole in a very general fashion. Human wills change, but what is there here below that does not change? The nations are not something eternal. They had their beginnings and they will end. A European confederation will very probably replace them. But such is not the law of the century in which we are living. At the present time, the existence is the guarantee of liberty, which would be lost if the world had only one law and only one master.

Through their various and often opposed powers, nations participate in the common work of civilization; each sounds a note in the great concert of humanity, which, after all, is the highest ideal reality that we are capable of attaining. Isolated, each has its weak point. I often tell myself that an individual who had those faults which in nations are taken for good qualities, who fed off vainglory, who was to that degree jealous, egotistical, and quarrelsome, and who would draw his sword on the smallest pretext, would be the most intolerable of men. Yet all these discordant details disappear in the overall context. Poor humanity, how you have suffered! How many trials still await you! May the spirit of wisdom guide you, in order to preserve you from the countless dangers with which your path is strewn!

Let me sum up, Gentlemen. Man is a slave neither of his race nor his language, nor of his religion, nor of the course of rivers nor of the direction taken by mountain chains. A large aggregate of men, healthy in mind and warm of heart, creates the kind of moral conscience which we call a nation. So long as this moral consciousness gives proof of its strength by the sacrifices which demand the abdication of the individual to the advantage of the community, it is legitimate and has the right to exist. If doubts arise regarding its frontiers, consult the populations in the areas under dispute. They undoubtedly have the right to a say in the matter. This recommendation will bring a smile to the lips of the transcendents of politics, these infallible beings who spend their lives deceiving themselves and who, from the height of their superior principles, take pity upon our mundane concerns. 'Consult the populations, for heaven's sake! How naive! A fine example of those wretched French ideas which claim to replace diplomacy and war by childish simple methods.' Wait a while, Gentlemen; let the reign of the transcendents pass; bear the scorn of the powerful with patience. It may be that, after many fruitless gropings, people will revert to our more modest empirical solutions. The best way of being right in the future is, in certain periods, to know how to resign oneself to being out of fashion.

NOTES

(Notes followed by an asterisk are the translator's.)

1* A lecture delivered at the Sorbonne, 11 March 1882. 'Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?', *Oeuvres Completes* (Paris, 1947-61), vol I, pp. 887-907. An earlier translation, which I have consulted, is in A. Zimmern (ed.), *Modern Political Doctrines* (London, 1939), pp. 186-205.

2* I have left *patrie* in the original French because it seems to me that to translate it into another European (or, indeed, non-European) language would be to eliminate the kinds of association the term had, in a very large number of countries, throughout the epoch of liberal-democratic nationalism. *Patrie* draws with it a whole cluster of complex and interlocking references to the values of the *patria* of classical republicanism. For an observer like Marx, these values were destroyed forever in the black farce of 1848. In another sense, as Marx's arguments in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* allow, they continued to influence the leaders of liberal, nationalist revolutions throughout the nineteenth century—although, obviously, if one were to phrase it in Italian terms, the Cavourian moderate rather than the Mazzinian or Garibaldian radical wing. It may be worth noting that, in the domain of scholarship, 'Fustel de Coulanges' *The Ancient*

City (1864), a study which profoundly influenced Emile Durkheim and which Renan himself had very probably read, shattered the vision of classical republicanism which men such as Robespierre and Saint-Just had entertained.

- 3* The doctrine of natural frontiers was given its definitive formulation in the course of the French Revolution, and was subsequently applied to other European countries, such as Germany or Italy; it was this doctrine that fuelled the irredentist movements of the second half of the nineteenth century. Justification of territorial claims often rested upon the interpretation of classical texts, such as Tacitus's *Germania* or Dante's *Commedia*.
- 4* The partition of Verdun (AD 843) ended a period of civil war within the Frankish Empire, during which the grandsons of Charlemagne had fought each other. Two of the newly created kingdoms, that of Charles the Bald (843–77) and that of Louis the German (843–76), bear some resemblance, in territorial terms, to modern France and modern Germany. Furthermore, much has been made of the linguistic qualities of the Oaths of Strasbourg, sworn by Louis and Charles to each other's armies, in Old French and Old High German respectively. This has often been regarded as the first text in a Romance language (as distinct from Latin) and, by extension, as the first symbolic appearance of the French (and German) nations.
- 5* Gregory of Tours (c. 539–94) was a Gallo-Roman and Bishop of Tours from 573 to 594. His *History of the Franks* is an account of life in Merovingian Gaul.
- 6* Upon the occasion of the massacre of Saint Bartholomew, in 1572, many thousands of Huguenots were killed. This was an event with momentous repercussions for the history of France in general, and for the development of political theory in particular.
- 7 The House of Savoy owes its royal title to its acquisition of Sardinia (1720).
- 8 The Pelasgians were believed, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to have been the original inhabitants of Italy.
- 9 I enlarged upon this point in a lecture, which is analysed in the *Bulletin of the Association scientifique de France*, 10 March 1878, 'Des services rendus aux Sciences historiques par la Philologie.'
- 10 Germanic elements are not more considerable in the United Kingdom than when they were in France, when she had possession of Alsace and Metz. If the Germanic language has dominated in the British isles, it was simply because Latin had not wholly replaced the Celtic languages, as it had done in Gaul.
- 11 Aglauros, who gave her life to save her *patrie*, represents the Acropolis itself.
- 12* *Zollverein* is the German word for customs union. Both participants in bourgeois, national revolutions and later commentators emphasize the relation between the nationalist cause and free trade within a single territory. However, E.J. Hobsbawm's comments, on pp. 166–8 of *The Age of Revolution* (London, 1962), shed some light upon Renan's aphorism, in that the vanguard of European nationalism in the 1830s and 1840s was not so much the business class as 'the lower and middle professional, administrative and intellectual strata, in other words, the educated classes'. At another level, Renan's observation reflects his shock at the defeat of France by Prussia in the Franco-Prussian war, which is expressed in both major and occasional writings.
- 13* Such epitaphs were part of the habitual repertoire of early-nineteenth-century nationalism, as Leopardi's 'patriotic' *canzoni* make plain.

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