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## **Blurring Image of Nation through Porous Border in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason and Countdown***

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**Abstract:** This article highlights the frailty of the concept of nation. It brings into light the existence of porous zone in a particular nation, which becomes a safe zone of illegal migration and immigration and as a result each and every nation remains alert in guarding the porous zone of that nation. This paper investigates the influence of porous zone through the analysis of Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason and Countdown* on the essential aspect of nation. Not only this, it brings into light the constructed feature of nation which needs constant guarding. The demanded unity behind the concept of nation gets blurred when we find the influence of another ideology beyond border on the subject of a particular nation in spite of the existence of constructed ideology of that nation itself. Thus nation as concept is vulnerable to change. As long as nation as a concept is able to mitigate the demands of its subjects, people remain loyal to this concept otherwise people start revolting against this. And this is what can be proved through the demands of separate states in a particular nation or through the revolution of citizens against its hegemonic structure. This growing globalized society deconstructs all the designed features of a particular nation through which elites want to impose a homogeneous identity. This paper shows the fragility of the concept of nation forwarding the existence of porous zone.

**Keywords:** porous border, nation, hybridity, racism, subaltern, globalization.

Porous border is that part of a defined geographical location of a nation which shares border with another neighbouring country and through that part illegal migration and immigration is possible. Every nation is conscious of maintaining its homogeneous identity and as a result of it, porous border becomes threat to both of the nations sharing border. Now the question arises how does it become a threat to a particular nation? To understand this, we need to have a look at the concept of nation itself. Nation itself is a constructed phenomenon. It has been designed assigning some subjective and objective features of its own. In regard to these features John McLeod says:

The emergence of national symbols, such as the flag or the National Anthem are parts of the 'invention of tradition' in which all nations participate: the repeated performance of rituals, events or symbols which take on an emotive and semi-sacred character for the people (70).

All these objective and subjective features are considered essential in regard to the distinctive nature of a particular nation. Thus the concept of nation stands on imposed essentialism. It is through porous border that illegal migration and immigration take place. When someone leaves one's own nation and enters into another nation, he/she carries with him/her the imposed belief system of previous nation. Due to this, porous border becomes a threat ground to the homogeneous identity which has been constructed keeping in mind the necessity of one's own nation. Next question which arises naturally is who defines nation? The answer to this question draws oneself to the history of a particular nation. Briefly speaking nation with colonial history invented its national identity imposing its superiority over colonizers. On the other hand, colonizers developed their national identity keeping in mind the developed capitalism in their own country but they disguised their

motive in the name of civilization-making. In this regard Elleke Boehmer comments:

At the time of high imperialism in the late nineteenth century, most British imperialists cherished an unambiguously heroic image of themselves as conquerors and civilizers of the world. (24)

It becomes clear that the discrimination between colonizer and colonized lies in the polarity of binary opposition of White/Native or vice versa. Both of them i.e. colonizers and colonized depicted their superiority imposing negative features on each others' shoulder to defend their own cause. On the one hand British capitalists wanted to make their imperial expansion stable, on the other hand, native elites wanted to draw the British back from permanent colonial set up in their native land. As a result of it, an ideological battle started between them. This battle kept them in an ambivalent situation. In this regard, the following words of Elleke Boehmer are worth quoting:

The European in the Empire rejects the native, yet he also requires the native's presence in order to experience to the full his own being as a white colonialist. (62)

The same effort of imposing superiority from native elites' side could be found when we speculate on native writers' striving to revive their own cultural uniqueness to defend their superiority against colonialist culture. The image of this effort comes forth through Elleke Boehmer's comment about Indian writers especially about Rabindranath Tagore that he (Tagore) "laid stress on the sensitivity, spirituality, and harmony of Indian culture, as against the harsh pragmatism and realism of Europe (114)". It becomes clear from this remark that national identity is an elitist construction which depends on its own defined features that has been determined by elites. From this perspective nation appears to be an apparatus in the hands of elites to control its subjects according to their ideology. Nation as a concept safeguards its uniqueness using different state machineries such as military, law or sometimes religion. Every political elite is well conscious of the instability of this concept as it

needs constant guarding. Because of the fragility of the concept of nation, porous borders have become a threat to the concept of nation. Every nation wants to keep stability to the concept of nation in its own geo-political area. They don't want it to be disturbed with the arrival of the citizens from another nation, so porous border remains a threat to the stability of a particular nation. Asma Jahangir, Pakistan's leading Human rights lawyer highlights the seriousness of the porous border in the following manner:

We have porous border with Afghanistan; the Taliban's interest is to keep it porous. Already you can see [their] influence in the North-West Frontier Province and Peshawar. (45)

The Taliban in Afghanistan are in constant struggle with America. America's bombing in Talibani's camp compelled them to leave Afghanistan and take an easy entry through Pakistan's porous border with Afghanistan. According to Asma Jahangir the easy entrance of these Talibanis may influence badly the stability of their nation. Talibanis do have a firm belief that what they are doing is for God's sake. And this belief of them may influence the mind of the Pakistani people a lot as this country is poverty stricken and trying to stand on its own ground after the economic fluctuation due to the nuclear tests that becomes clear through Amitav Ghosh's non-fictional work *Countdown*. Youths of Pakistan may take it as an alternative source of income and thus the hegemonic structure of Pakistan may collapse. From this point of view it becomes clear that unity in the name of nationalism is vulnerable to change confronting an alternative ideology. Thus the concept of nation appears fragile as it is unable to keep its subjects' faith in its homogeneous identity. The Honourable Supreme Court of India also showed deep concern over the issue of porous border and ordered the Central Government to fence all those parts especially in North Eastern region of India sharing border with Bangladesh, Myanmar, and China. All these issues and precautions related to porous border highlight the fragility of the concept of nation.

Each and every nation has its own way to represent its uniqueness. This defined uniqueness upholds the homogeneous identity of a particular nation. From dress to food the nation stamps its own uniqueness but unable to keep its purity. This growing globalized world influences this homogeneous nature of nation a lot. This is what is visible from the massive change in dress up to food habit. Now-a-days even in India the culinary system has gone through a big change. This change is the direct result of globalization. Now the point that comes in mind at this stage is that whether all the movements of people from one nation to another is solely based on defined legal procedures or they have their own way to manage it. Still in this period a particular nation sharing border with neighbouring nation cannot restrain the illegal entrance of people from border area. As a result of it, the global culture has become hybridized. The influence of this on food item is very crucial and it compels us to think about the validity of the demanded uniqueness behind the concept of nation. Chitrita Banerji in her work *Eating India: Exploring a Nation's Cuisine* describes her own experience about the authenticity of food items in India. It is on Chitrita's experience about the authenticity of Indian food Rajarshi Mitra comments:

For Chitrita assimilation and regeneration are two subthemes of the grand theme of authenticity itself. By assimilation she means the fusion of different culinary traditions and regeneration is both the dynamics of food ways and the new found interest in various varieties of food. (299)

The changes that can be noticed from dress up to food habit reflect the ineffectiveness of border area. Though cartographers drew border on the map or politicians erected border geographically, that effort to guard the uniqueness of a particular nation seems fruitless when the designed uniqueness puts to test. Even after all these, each and every nation is very conscious about the maintenance of its uniqueness. That's why they remain alert about the activities near the porous border. The uniqueness of a particular nation i.e. the defined features of a particular nation rely on constant performance. That's

why in each and every nation some events have been adopted as red letter day and the constant performance of these events is nothing but the effort to keep intact the discourse of nation. Before the colonial period no one has ever heard of this term 'porous border'. This concept has become prominent in this modern period as each and every nation is suspicious about the activities of neighbouring nation. It's with economical, technological and communicative improvement that each and every nation has designed its own diplomacy to spread its own market zone beyond its defined geo-political area. And as a result of it, all the nations are found in constant economical competition against each and other. It's also because of this that also nations always remain alert about the activities in the border areas. Other social and political factors also make this porous border area unsafe for hegemonic structure of a particular nation. In the present world, the mass movement of people from different terror stricken areas to other parts of the world is the burning example of porous border consciousness of any particular nation. No nation is willing to take extra burden on their shoulder as it might cause harm to their hegemonic structure. In other words, this unwillingness on the part of different nations might be understood as a step of precaution on their part. This ever conscious outlook of the elites in regard to the porous border highlights the frailty of the concept of nation. This frail side of the concept of nation becomes clear through Homi K. Bhabha's comment:

Nations, like narratives lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizon in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation-or narration might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the West. An idea whose cultural compulsion lies in the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force. (1)

Thus, from the above mentioned discussion it can be stated that porous border is a threat to the hegemonic structure of a particular

nation. It becomes a threat to the concept of nation as the nation itself is a fragile construction.

The discourse of nationalism varies according to the spatio-temporal matrix. Each and every nation has its own mode of discourse to represent their nationality and because of this no nation wants to take risk of nurturing the ideology of different nation within its own geo-political region by which the constructed stability of its own discourse might get disturbed. As a result of it, in the porous border area one can find constant eyeing of the authority. The same ever conscious outlook of the authority gets clear in Amitav Ghosh's debut novel *The Circle of Reason* where the authority remains alert about the activities in the border area of Lalpukur:

Lalpukur is a border town and the police are given money from their headquarters to get information.  
(Ghosh 1986, 22)

Here in this novel it has been described that people living in this area were under strict observation by the local police of this region. Bhudeb Roy acted as an agent who used to give information to the local police about the day to day happenings at Lalpukur area. He represented himself as an elitist at Lalpukur and people find themselves in an inferior position. Bhudeb Roy wanted the favour of the authority and as a result of it sometimes he manipulated the existence of the people living in Lalpukur area. He arranged sarcastic puja in school but this is also to impress the Inspector of Schools so that he might get a grant or appointment.

Thus in the postnational phenomenon also the image of colonial phenomenon comes to our mind where elite group maintains a distance with the common folk and thus the emergence of neo-colonial phenomenon can be found where people find the replacement of foreign colonialist with the arrival of native colonialist. Bhudeb Roy and the native police are the perfect examples of this phenomenon. This neo-colonial phenomenon is also the product of nationalism as the concept of nationalism is itself western in origin. The sense of unity or oneness behind the concept of nationalism loses its grip when the new educated elite adopted the



same structure of colonialist in the post-independent period with a suspicious alertness towards its subjects. This suspicious outlook inside and outside the border compel us to think about the fragile condition of nation which is dependent on border image. According to V.S. Sankara Rao Chinnam such border images “should be challenged – be they political, cultural, linguistic, racial, communal, spatial or even temporal. All these borders are constructs and meant for crossing (154).

This fragile nature of border comes forth through the description of Noakhali immigrants in the Lalpukur area. But all the time the alertness of the native authority can be noticed as they are in constant effort to maintain the stability of their own geographical location. The whole world because of the creation of border has been compartmentalized into different segments where different ideologies are in operation. And the existence of different ideologies in different nations keeps them alert in the border area. The unity which has been imposed creating geo-political border has failed in its effort in maintaining unity in its own defined geographical location. The authority in the border area tries to maintain difference between its own subjects and refugees if there is any in its own defined geographical location. This effort of authority is visible through ASP Jyoti Das's comment:

...there were so many refugees in those border areas and they were good clay for anyone's hands (Ghosh 1986, 137).

This statement of Jyoti Das highlights the fractured image of unity in his own nation. He knew even in his own nation the rage against the authority prevails as the authority is unable to mitigate the problems that they assured once. That's why in each and every nation the history of revolution and the movement of people can be perceived. It is this movement of people from one nation to another questions the demanded stability behind the concept of nation. Though nationalism stands on clear cut identity of someone, it fades away approaching another nation where someone in search of shelter may be regarded as refugee. In regard to identity Sanjeb Mukherjee stated that

“Identity seeks certainty; it seeks clear-cut boundaries. One is either an Indian or a foreign, say, a German. One is either a national citizen or an alien – the legitimacy of refugees, migrants, gypsies or stateless people is shrouded in uncertainty (81).

The legitimate existence in this world now-a-days depends on valid identity and this validity depends on elitists’ constructed geo-political world. The influence of elites in any particular nation could be found easily and this influence of elitists makes Alu an extremist in front of people and authority. Bhudeb Roy, the elite in the Lalpukur area gave wrong information about Shombhu Debnath and Rakhal to quench his personal revenge:

I have definite information that Shombhu Debnath and his son have been getting weapons from across the border. (Ghosh 1986, 141)

This incident in *The Circle of Reason* highlights the influential image of elites in the society. Not only this, it attracts our attention to the fact that the subjects in a particular nation are nothing but the manipulated identity who needs constant guarding otherwise there is the potentiality of collapsing of the hegemonic structure of a particular nation.

Benedict Anderson regards nation as ‘an imagined community’. In defence of his comment he says “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 6). Here onwards we need to study the nature of that unity. The elite Bhudeb Roy in *The Circle of Reason* highlights the fragile image of that unity. He was trying badly to create his influence among the people of Lalpukur area. And this effort of Bhudeb Roy highlights a neo-colonial phenomenon when he says:

Straight lines are the best way of moving ahead, the shortest distance between two points...the need of the hour is straight lines. (Ghosh 1986, 104)

These words reflect Bhudeb Roy's authoritative attitude. All of a sudden he started upholding his position as superior in comparison to the villagers. People of this village bowed head in need of work in front of Bhudeb Roy and this gave Bhudeb Roy a chance to create a new group in Lalpukur area. Thus a clear picture of neo-colonial society is depicted us. Here in Lalpukur area social stratification got a new dimension where people can be divided into two groups – one is rich and another poor. Whereas Bhudeb Roy represents the rich elite category, the villagers are the representatives of poor section of the society. *The Circle of Reason* highlights a postcolonial phenomenon and in this postcolonial phenomenon the colonial attitude of the native rulers like Bhudeb Roy questions that demanded unity behind the concept of nation.

So, here onwards if someone plunges deeply into the analysis of unity, nation could be found divided into two sections where one section comprises of people belonging to the main strata of society and another section comprises of 'subalterns'. The way the government of India tested nuclear weapons in Pokharan district in 1978 & 1998, it brings into light the image of subalterns in that region. In Ghosh's non-fictional work *Countdown*, through the description of people in that area the existence of voiceless people comes forth. Amitav Ghosh visited the site of nuclear tests after three months of the test. During his visit he went to Khetoloi, the nearest village from Pokaran. There he conversed with some elders and got their response regarding the test. A young man of Khetoloi, a clerk by profession commented:

The only people who benefits from these tests are the politicians...They bring no benefits to anyone else in the country. (Ghosh 1999, 5)

This comment is noticeable in the sense that it brings into light the real face of political elites and it is the face of a guard who wants to protect the hegemonic structure of its own geo-political area. Political elites in a particular nation determine dos or don'ts of its subjects. Their decision is upheld through various mediums like newspaper, television, radio etc. and within this propagation of their ideology the

voice of the common people is subdued. No one hears their voice or in other words it can be stated that their voice becomes alienated from the mass. The sufferings of the people in Khetoloi never came to the mass during the test as these tests had been manipulated differently which becomes clear from the following lines:

There was talk of sending dust from test site around the country so that the whole nation could partake in the glow of the blasts. Some of the B.J.P's leaders were said to be thinking of building a monument at Pokharan, a 'shrine of strength' that could be visited by pilgrims. (Ghosh 1999, 2)

The test of nuclear of devices was given a glorious identity by the political elites in power during that time. Some political elites wanted to make it a pilgrimage for the people to visit so that a new ritual could be added to maintain the stability of the nation. This thinking shows how the concept of nation is being guarded by the elites in the society. People and their sufferings living in that area get shrouded under all these manipulations. No one ever thought of the existence of the people in that area and as a result of it their entity in the nation becomes invisible. The Prime Minister of India Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee at that time photographed himself while throwing flowers into the pit created during the nuclear tests. Thus the nuclear tests had been glorified. But on 28<sup>th</sup> May Pakistan also tested his own nuclear devices and thus they responded against the nuclear tests of India. These nuclear tests of India and the similar response from the neighbouring country Pakistan highlight a devastating picture of future. It brings into light a bitter future where each and every nation could be found nurturing suspicious attitude about the existence of other nations. The welfare of each and every nation is relied upon the shoulder of political elites and it is they who take necessary decisions about the policies to be taken in regard to other nations. These political elites took the decisions regarding the test of nuclear devices in their respective nations. Without considering the outcome of these tests they gave permission in favour of nuclear tests and the result of it becomes clear to us as "The rupee had fallen to a historic low, the stock market index had plummeted, prices had soared" (Ghosh 1999,

2). These tests had a great impact on the economy and people had to take burden on their shoulders. But it was not all; these tests put the lives of those people in danger who were living near the testing area. The people of Khetoloi suffer a lot because of the radioactivity prevalent in air. But this is not the first time that nuclear devices were tested in India.

During Mrs. Indira Gandhi's time too, nuclear devices were tested. All these tests polluted the air of this region and as a result of it various skin diseases and cancer started affecting people. Manohar Joshi, an inhabitant of Khetoloi commented:

If these things had happened anywhere else in the country, in Bihar or Kashmir, people would rise up and stop it. But people here don't protest, they were too quiescent; they'll put up with anything. (Ghosh 1999, 3)

The above mentioned comment reflects the existence of subaltern people in a particular nation. People of Khetoloi area were unable to show their sufferings. They had to suffer the deadly reaction of radioactivity after these tests. They had to succumb to the will of the political elites. They were not even provided proper compensation for their loss. All these incidents highlight the existence of a neo-colonial phenomenon. The demanded unity behind the concept of nation appears to be futile when we analyse the condition of the people in this area. People living in this area started getting effected by cancer after these tests but no one noticed their sufferings. All these incidents in this postmodern world highlight the frail image of unity behind the concept of nation

Nation as a concept should change its outlook so that it can accommodate itself in this growing global phenomenon. Otherwise, the world will be thrown into never ending war zone. The way political elites like Bhudeb Roy create influence in the society; time has come when people should come out from the shell of narrow nationalistic outlook. Balaram, Rakhai or Alu in *The Circle of Reason* are those who belong to the marginalized section of the society. They are those who showed the courage to stand against the neo-colonial influence of the native elites but their effort led them to

misery. They have been tagged as extremist and inflicted inhuman torture. Balam's house has been raided by police on the basis of Bhudeb Roy's information. Bhudeb Roy's personal grudge against them got satisfied with the destruction of Balam and Rakhal's family. The never ending influence of elites in the administrative structure of any particular nation becomes clear through Bhudeb Roy's character. Whereas in *The Circle of Reason* Alu was compelled to roam here and there to avoid arrest, people of Pokharan were also compelled to live along with radioactivity. If it is the nature of any particular nation where people are adjudged on the parameter decided by the elites then it can be proposed to think again about claim of demanded unity in the name of nationalism. The definition of development should cross the geo-political area designed by the elites of any particular nation. Sustainable development is possible if it considers the welfare of mankind irrespective of their nationality. Otherwise, the present condition of nations can be regarded as mere extension of colonial setting.

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