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## Nation As Narrative: Contesting National Identity In ‘*The Shadow Lines*’ And ‘*Ice-Candy-Man*’

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the representation and contestation of national identity in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988), exploring how both novels problematize the notion of the nation as a fixed and homogenous entity. Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s theory of “imagined communities” and postcolonial critiques of historiography, the study argues that the nation is a narrative construct sustained by selective memory and the erasure of dissenting voices. *The Shadow Lines* destabilizes spatial and temporal boundaries, using fragmented storytelling to reveal the arbitrariness of political borders and the permeability of identities. In contrast, *Ice-Candy-Man*, narrated through the innocent yet perceptive voice of a young Parsi girl, confronts the brutality of Partition and the gendered violence that accompanied the subcontinent’s division. Both novels foreground marginalized perspectives—women, minorities, and transnational subjects—challenging official histories and exposing the fractures within nationalist discourse. Through narrative fragmentation, polyphonic voices, and the interplay of personal and collective memory, Ghosh and Sidhwa illustrate that national identity is



inherently contested, mutable, and often exclusionary. By comparing these two works, the paper demonstrates how literature can serve as a critical space for reimagining the nation beyond rigid boundaries and for acknowledging the multiplicity of histories that constitute its fabric.

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### **Introduction:-**

The nation, as an idea and as a lived reality, has always been more than a fixed geographical entity. It is a construct, imagined into being through the interplay of shared memories, myths, and historical narratives. As Benedict Anderson famously argued, “the nation is an imagined political community — and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson 6). In postcolonial contexts such as South Asia, this imagination is complicated by the legacies of colonial rule, Partition, and the enduring tensions between official history and personal memory. Literature emerging from the subcontinent in the latter half of the twentieth century frequently interrogates the stability of national identity, exploring how personal stories contest, subvert, or redefine the grand narratives of the state.

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988) stand as two seminal works that engage deeply with this negotiation of national identity. While *The Shadow Lines* examines the porousness of borders and the fluidity of identity through an intricate narrative of memory, *Ice-Candy-Man* offers an intimate portrayal of Partition violence and the gendered dimensions of national trauma through the eyes of a child narrator. Both novels question the idea of the nation as a homogenous and stable construct, instead revealing it as fragmented, contested, and constantly renegotiated.

The conceptual frame for this study, “nation as narrative,” underscores the fact that the nation is not merely a political or territorial fact but also a discursive construct — a story told and retold through a variety of voices, some sanctioned by state authority, others emerging from the margins. As Homi K. Bhabha observes, “nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind’s eye” (Bhabha, 1). This perspective allows us to see that national identity is neither singular nor immutable but rather a palimpsest written over by successive historical and personal inscriptions.

In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator’s recollections of his extended family’s connections across Calcutta, Dhaka, and London challenge the idea that political borders neatly separate peoples and cultures. The novel exposes the arbitrariness of cartographic lines by emphasizing the deep continuities of relationships that transcend them. *Ice-Candy-Man*, on the other hand, dramatizes the ruptures of Partition through the



experiences of Lenny, a young Parsi girl in Lahore, whose community is itself positioned ambiguously within the Hindu-Muslim binary. By focusing on gendered violence, Sidhwa interrogates the patriarchal underpinnings of nationalist discourse, showing how women's bodies become symbolic battlegrounds for competing claims to the nation.

Together, these works present two distinct yet complementary visions of how national identity is constructed, contested, and lived. This paper argues that both Ghosh and Sidhwa destabilize the grand narratives of the nation by foregrounding personal memory, subjective experience, and marginalized perspectives, thereby inviting a rethinking of what it means to belong to — or be excluded from — the nation.

### **Theoretical Framework: Nation, Narrative, and Identity:-**

The theoretical grounding for this comparative study draws on postcolonial theory, narrative theory, and memory studies. The “nation as narrative” approach rests on the insight that nations are not natural facts but discursive constructions sustained through storytelling, ritual, and symbolic representation.

Benedict Anderson's influential work *Imagined Communities*, reframes the nation as an imagined community in which members “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). This shared imagination is often cultivated through print capitalism, education, and state institutions. In both *The Shadow Lines* and *Ice-Candy-Man*, the narrators inhabit such imagined communities, but their lived experiences reveal cracks in the seamless façade of national identity.

In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator's family connections and friendships defy the neat divisions imposed by the Partition of Bengal and the Indo-Pakistani borders. The nation here is not a singular, binding reality but an arbitrary division in constant tension with transnational human connections. In *Ice-Candy-Man*, the Parsi community's ambiguous place in the newly divided subcontinent illustrates the selective inclusions and exclusions that define the imagined community.

### **Memory, History, and Personal Narrative :-**

Both novels privilege personal memory over official history. Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity is instructive here: “Time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative, and narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience” (Ricoeur, 52). Ghosh's novel is structured as a tapestry of memories, where the past is constantly



reinterpreted in light of the present. Sidhwa's child narrator likewise filters historical events through personal experience, creating a dissonance between the innocence of childhood and the brutality of Partition.

### **The Shadow Lines: Memory, Borders, and the Fluidity of Identity :-**

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is a work that challenges the certainties of historical boundaries and foregrounds the porousness of national identity. Told through the recollections of an unnamed narrator, the novel shifts across temporal and spatial planes — from Calcutta to London to Dhaka — weaving together family history, personal memory, and historical events. At its core lies a profound questioning of the very idea of borders: geographical, political, and psychological.

#### Narrative Structure and the Rejection of Linear History

The novel's structure refuses chronological narration, opting instead for a complex layering of past and present. This choice is not merely aesthetic; it mirrors the narrator's own realization that history is not a neat sequence of events but an accumulation of memories, often contradictory, sometimes incomplete. As the narrator reflects:- "Every story I have ever heard, all that I know of the past, is my grandmother's voice" (Ghosh, 45).

Here, the narrator signals that personal memory — mediated through family storytelling — becomes his primary archive, not official historiography. This aligns with Paul Ricoeur's notion that narrative shapes our perception of time and identity (Ricoeur 52). The "truth" of history, Ghosh suggests, is always refracted through the subjectivity of memory.

This non-linear structure also allows Ghosh to juxtapose disparate events — the Second World War, the Partition of Bengal, the 1964 Calcutta-Dhaka riots — showing how they reverberate across decades and geographies. The result is a narrative in which political events are inseparable from the intimate lives they transform.

#### Borders as Imaginary Constructs

One of the most striking aspects of *The Shadow Lines* is its sustained critique of borders as arbitrary lines imposed upon a shared cultural and historical landscape. Tridib, the narrator's mentor and cousin, instills in him a fascination for maps but simultaneously warns against mistaking them for reality:-

"A border isn't drawn on the ground, you can't see it. It's only a line in our heads" (Ghosh, 78).



This metaphor of “shadow lines” captures the novel’s central argument: political borders are sustained not by physical barriers but by collective belief and imagination. They are, in Anderson’s sense, products of the imagined community, but Ghosh pushes further to reveal their fragility. The narrator’s journey to Dhaka years after the Partition underscores this — he discovers that his grandmother’s ancestral home lies across a border that feels simultaneously real and unreal, guarded yet porous.

The riot scenes in Dhaka, which culminate in Tridib’s death, illustrate the lethal consequences of these imagined lines. The narrator cannot reconcile the arbitrariness of the border with the permanence of his personal loss, embodying the human cost of nationalist divisions.

### Family Histories and Transnational Ties

The novel complicates nationalist narratives by foregrounding cross-border kinship and friendships. The Price family in London, connected to the narrator’s family in Calcutta, represents a transnational network of relationships that defy the logic of political separation. May Price’s visit to Calcutta and her later role in the events in Dhaka underscore the fact that personal bonds can transcend — though not always overcome — political hostility.

The grandmother’s character is key to this tension. Fiercely nationalist in her views, she nonetheless inhabits a world in which her own family’s history straddles India and East Pakistan. Her inability to reconcile these facts mirrors the contradictions of post-Partition identity, where personal histories often resist official cartographies.

### Memory as Resistance to Official Histories

The narrator’s recollections function as a counter-history to the grand narratives of the state. His detailed memories of conversations, places, and emotions disrupt the homogenizing tendencies of official historiography. For instance, he recalls the silence in his family around the 1964 riots, noting:-

“We could discuss the Second World War or the floods in East Bengal, but not the riots in which Tridib died” (Ghosh, 223).

This silence is telling — certain events are excised from collective memory because they do not fit the cohesive narrative of the nation. By narrating these silences, Ghosh recovers what Aleida Assmann calls “counter-memory” — the stories that resist incorporation into state-sanctioned history.



The narrator's act of remembering thus becomes an act of resistance. He refuses to let Tridib's death be reduced to a statistic in communal violence; instead, it is a deeply personal rupture that exposes the emptiness of the border's promise of safety.

### Hybridity and Cosmopolitanism

Tridib's worldview, which the narrator gradually adopts, exemplifies Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity — a consciousness that inhabits multiple cultural and geographical spaces without seeking to reconcile them into a singular identity. Tridib tells the narrator to “travel to places with your mind's eye before you set foot there” (Ghosh, 31), encouraging an imaginative geography that undermines the fixity of national borders.

Characters like Ila, who lives in London and rejects the constraints of Indian society, also embody this cosmopolitan hybridity, though she remains ambivalent about belonging anywhere fully. The narrator's longing for Ila underscores the complexities of desire in a world where identity is increasingly deteriorated.

### The Riot as a Narrative Climax

The communal riots in Dhaka serve as the novel's tragic climax, bringing into focus the tension between the personal and the political. Tridib's death occurs in a seemingly avoidable moment, the result of being in the wrong place at the wrong time — or, more precisely, the wrong side of an imaginary line. The narrator's later obsession with reconstructing the events of that day reflects his attempt to make sense of a loss that official narratives cannot account for.

This episode also reflects Partha Chatterjee's insight about the “inner domain” of the nation: the riot penetrates the supposed sanctuary of the home, showing that no private space is immune from the violence of nationalist politics. May Price's guilt over Tridib's death adds an international dimension to the tragedy, complicating the notion of insider and outsider in the nation's story. In one of the novel's most poignant reflections, the narrator observes: - “What was it all for, this partitioning, this drawing of lines, if they could not even keep us safe?” (Ghosh, 236)

This question cuts to the heart of the novel's challenge to nationalist rhetoric: if the border fails to protect, what purpose does it serve beyond sustaining an illusion of difference?

Therefore, in *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh dismantles the certainties of national identity by showing that borders are as much mental constructs as political facts, sustained by narratives that can be rewritten.



Through its fragmented chronology, focus on personal memory, and portrayal of transnational relationships, the novel asserts that the stories we tell about the nation are always partial, contested, and in flux. The “shadow lines” of the title are thus both the borders we draw and the narratives we live by — ephemeral, permeable, yet often devastating in their effects.

### **Ice-Candy-Man: Partition, Gender, and the Violence of National Narratives**

Bapsi Sidhwa’s *‘Ice-Candy-Man’* offers a visceral portrayal of the Partition of India in 1947 through the eyes of Lenny, a young Parsi girl in Lahore. Like Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*, Sidhwa’s novel interrogates the idea of national identity, but it does so from the perspective of a community that is neither Hindu nor Muslim, occupying a liminal position in the emerging political landscape. Through this marginal vantage point, Sidhwa explores the human costs of nationalist rhetoric, particularly its gendered dimensions, as women’s bodies become battlegrounds for competing claims to community honor.

#### **The Child Narrator and the Politics of Innocence:-**

Lenny’s narration is filtered through the double consciousness of a child’s literal-mindedness and an adult’s retrospective understanding. This narrative device allows Sidhwa to juxtapose the innocence of childhood perception with the brutality of Partition violence. Early in the novel, Lenny describes her world in Lahore with affection and curiosity:- “The world is full of people who have never seen my Ayah’s bare feet” (Sidhwa, 3).

At first, this perspective seems far removed from the political upheavals brewing around her. However, as the novel progresses, the reader witnesses the gradual intrusion of political realities into Lenny’s sheltered existence. Her seemingly simple observations often carry a second layer of meaning that only the adult reader can fully grasp, a technique that enables Sidhwa to narrate horrific events without descending into graphic sensationalism.

#### **Parsi Identity and National Neutrality:-**

The Parsi community’s unique position during Partition — as a small, largely apolitical minority — complicates the idea of the “imagined community” that Anderson describes. Lenny’s family tries to maintain neutrality, hosting friends from across religious divides, including Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. Lenny’s Godmother counsels her to “keep to our own and stay clear of politics” (Sidhwa, 45)- an attempt to shield the family from the dangers of communal violence.



Yet this very attempt at neutrality is itself a political stance. By refusing to align fully with either emerging national narrative, the Parsis occupy a liminal space that exposes the arbitrariness of nationalist divisions. Lenny's perspective underscores the fact that national identity is not simply a matter of inherited belonging but often a strategic negotiation for survival.

#### Ayah as the Embodiment of the Nation's Gendered Body:-

One of the novel's most potent symbols is Ayah, Lenny's beautiful Hindu nanny. Ayah's admirers — Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and British — represent the pluralism of pre-Partition Lahore, a microcosm of a cosmopolitan India. However, as communal tensions escalate, these admirers become aligned with their respective religious communities, and Ayah's body becomes the literal site of nationalist contestation.

Her eventual abduction by a mob led by Ice-Candy-Man transforms her from a symbol of shared desire into a possession claimed by one community at the expense of another. Sidhwa writes:- "They drag her... Ayah's voice is lost in the roaring of the mob" (Sidhwa, 168).

This moment encapsulates the feminist critique of nationalism articulated by scholars such as Nira Yuval-Davis, who note that women often serve as "symbolic bearers of the collectivity's identity and honor" (Yuval-Davis 7). Ayah's fate illustrates how, in moments of nationalist crisis, women's autonomy is subordinated to the patriarchal logic of communal honor.

#### Ice-Candy-Man: Transformation and Betrayal:-

The character of Ice-Candy-Man embodies the shifting allegiances and moral compromises that Partition engenders. Initially presented as a charming and somewhat comic figure — a street vendor with a flair for gossip — he becomes increasingly politicized as violence escalates. His romantic pursuit of Ayah is initially benign, but when he perceives his community's honor as threatened, he becomes complicit in her abduction.

His justification for this act — that he could not stand by while "our women were taken" (Sidhwa, 172) — reveals the conflation of personal desire with communal vengeance. This transformation from suitor to perpetrator illustrates Homi Bhabha's insight that identities in the nation-space are unstable and performative, often shifting under the pressures of historical crisis.

One of the novel's most haunting aspects is its depiction of silence — the refusal or inability to speak about trauma. After Ayah is taken, Lenny is consumed by guilt, believing that her unwitting betrayal (pointing Ayah out to Ice-Candy-Man) caused her nanny's abduction. Yet the family never openly



discusses the event, mirroring the collective silences around Partition violence in South Asian societies. This silence echoes Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, where certain traumatic events are excised from communal memory because they disrupt the coherence of the national narrative.

#### Women's Agency and Post-Partition Recovery:-

Ayah's eventual return facilitated by Godmother's intervention is not framed as a triumphant rescue but as a return to a world that has irrevocably changed. She refuses to stay with Ice-Candy-Man, choosing instead to leave for Amritsar, a decision that asserts some measure of agency but also underscores the limitations faced by women in reclaiming their lives after sexual violence.

Godmother, who confronts Ice-Candy-Man directly, represents a form of female authority that resists patriarchal control. Her moral authority contrasts sharply with the narrator's mother, whose primary focus is protecting her own family. This spectrum of female responses to violence complicates any simplistic reading of women as mere victims in nationalist narratives; they can also be agents of resistance, though their agency is often circumscribed by social norms.

#### Partition as Lived Experience:-

Sidhwa's novel resists treating Partition as a purely political or historical event; instead, it foregrounds its lived, embodied effects. The political rhetoric of freedom and self-determination is juxtaposed with the bodily realities of hunger, displacement, and sexual violence. For Lenny, the meaning of the new nation — whether India or Pakistan — is mediated entirely through the transformations in her immediate social world: the loss of friends, the disappearance of Ayah, the tension in her household.

By narrating Partition from the perspective of a child, Sidhwa exposes the gap between nationalist ideals and everyday realities. Lenny's fragmented understanding mirrors the fragmented identities produced by Partition — identities that cannot be neatly contained within the categories of "Indian" or "Pakistani."

#### Narrative Form and the Fragmentation of Identity:-

Like Ghosh, Sidhwa employs a narrative structure that resists linearity. Lenny's memories shift between pre-Partition harmony and post-Partition rupture, creating a mosaic that reflects the fractured nature of national identity in the subcontinent. The narrative voice blends observation, overheard conversation, and retrospective commentary, underscoring the constructed nature of both personal and national narratives.



By the novel's end, Ice-Candy-Man has become a shadow of his former self, following Ayah to Amritsar in the hope of reconciliation. His reduced state reflects the moral and psychological toll of the violence he has both witnessed and perpetrated. This trajectory complicates any attempt to categorize him solely as villain or victim; instead, he emerges as a deeply flawed individual shaped and warped, by the pressures of nationalist politics.

His fate also gestures toward the novel's broader theme: the destruction wrought by the obsessive policing of communal boundaries. Just as Ayah's body became a site of contested ownership, Ice-Candy-Man's life becomes circumscribed by the nationalist narratives he once embraced.

### **Conclusion:-**

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* each interrogate the concept of the nation as a stable, homogeneous entity, revealing instead its narrative and contested nature. Both novels dismantle the notion that political borders can contain the complexity of human relationships, memories, and identities. In Ghosh's work, the "shadow lines" that divide nations are exposed as arbitrary mental constructs, maintained by the stories people tell themselves and others. The narrator's fragmented memories, Tridib's hybrid worldview, and the transnational bonds between families challenge the fixity of nationalist narratives.

Sidhwa's novel, by contrast, focuses on the violence of nation-making, particularly its gendered dimensions. Through Lenny's child's-eye view, the Partition is revealed not as a triumphant birth of independence but as a period of loss, betrayal, and dislocation. Ayah's abduction and violation stand as a stark reminder that nationalist rhetoric often exacts its highest price from women, whose bodies become symbols of community honor and sites of political conflict. The Parsi community's liminal status underscores the selective inclusions and exclusions inherent in any imagined community.

In different ways, both novels foreground personal memory as a counterpoint to official history. Ghosh's narrator resists the silences around certain events, insisting on remembering Tridib's death in all its complexity, while Sidhwa's Lenny struggles with her guilt over Ayah's fate, embodying the moral consequences of silence and complicity. These acts of remembering challenge the homogenizing tendencies of nationalist discourse, offering instead a mosaic of experiences that cannot be subsumed into a single, authoritative version of the nation's story.

Both the books suggest that the nation is less a bounded territory than a constantly rewritten narrative, one that must account for the plurality of voices and experiences that constitute it. In resisting the



erasure and simplifications of official histories, both works affirm the power of literature to bear witness to the complexities of identity, belonging, and loss in the shadow of national borders. The “nation as narrative” thus emerges not as a metaphor but as an urgent reminder that the stories we tell, and those we don’t, shape the very contours of our imagined communities.

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