

# Nationalism and SAARC Literature in English.

Mr. Hiten Solanki  
Ph.D. student,  
Sardar Patel University, V.V. Nagar.

**Abstract:** Notion of 'Nation' and 'Nationalism' has been pivotal issue gaining attention of the writers of South Asia in recent decades. Delineating conceptual variability of the terms: 'state' - 'nation' and 'patriotism' – 'nationalism', the ideologues attempt to redefine the idea of Nation and Nationalism contextualizing the said concepts into the local conditions. The hegemonic impact of western literary practices has arguably overshadowed the indigenous literary spirit, however, literary production of the writers from the East has noticeably made its way in the world literature in the twentieth and twenty first century. Consequently, revival of indigenous model of nation and conception of nationalism has become prevalent expression in contemporary literature of South Asia. This paper is an attempt to examine variable perceptions pertinent to the idea of 'nation' and 'nationalism' discoursed in literature of SAARC nations: India and Pakistan. Analyzing two of the critically acclaimed texts with regards to nationalism – *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh and *The Broken Verses* by Kamila Shamsie, the paper examines scrupulously the conflicting ideologies pertinent to nationalism; for instance, constitutional nationalism that was triggered during anti-colonial era and religious nationalism that accentuates the revival of ancient religio-cultural ideologies in favor of asserting the complete indigenous power.

**Key terms:** Nation, Nationalism, SAARC, Constitutional nationalism, Religious nationalism.

---

Before the British conquest of the South Asian region, relations between regional peoples and sovereign power had not been defined wholly by religion. In the post-colonial era, religious identity has been closely linked to the emerging nation states in South Asia. The partition of Indian sub-continent into two nations, India and Pakistan, on the basis of religious identity disrupted centuries old networks of communication as well as cultural and material exchange... The scars of this colonial legacy still define the nationalism debate in South Asian sub-continent. (Fernandes iii)

- Denzil Fernandes

In his editorial note, Denzil Fernandes postulates the nationalism debate in South Asian region analyzing democratic model of secularism and emerging trends of religious nationalism among state members of the region. Observing the emergence of trending religious nationalism in post-colonial era, Denzil Fernandes, further, claims that Indo-Pak geo-political partition based on religious identity has remained an essential phenomenon that defines nationalism in South Asian sub-continent. Being the scar of colonial legacy, the partition is generally perceived to be the greatest hurdle in achieving the goals of South Asian Association of Regional Corporation (SAARC) that has been an epic attempt of uniting state members of South Asian region. After studying the process of constitutionalizing the religion in each state members, the researcher has observed that India and Nepal are the only secular nations out of eight SAARC nations; the rest of the six SAARC nations have legalized a national religion, for instance, Pakistan – Islam, Afghanistan – Islam, Bangladesh – Islam, Maldives – Islam, Bhutan and Sri Lanka – Buddhism. Nepal has been recognized as secular country in the recent years of the history with the termination of last Hindu monarchy in the world, as secular republic was established in Nepal in 2008 and was affirmed in constitutional adoption in 2015. The diverse demography of SAARC has complicated the concept of nationalism igniting the conflict among nationalist ideologues and practitioners, which has been polarized mainly in two distinct groups: one of the secular ideologues who instill their faith in democratic model and constitutional nationalism and the second consist of the crusaders who insist the revival and establishment of ancient indigenous culture triggering religious nationalism. This paper is an attempt to examine the conflicting ideologies of nationalism by the means of analyzing the literary texts: *The Shadow Lines* by an Indian writer Amitav Ghosh and *The Broken Verses* by a Pakistani writer Kamila Shamsie, which arguably discourse the nationalism prevalent in respective nations. In order to contextualize the

topic, it is essential to construct basic understanding pertinent to association between SAARC (South Asian Association of Regional Co-operation) and the apex body FOSWAL (Foundation of SAARC writers and Literature).

**SAARC (South Asian Association of Regional Co-operation) and FOSWAL (Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature):**

Established in 1985 with proposal and constant efforts of late President of Bangladesh, Ziaur Rahman, SAARC has claimed recognition across the world as an economic regional association. SAARC (South Asian Association of Regional Co-operation) is an exemplary association established by eight South Asian countries; India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Maldives and the latest one is Afghanistan, bearing common as well as contradictory characteristics as far as national character concerns. The only SAARC apex body in the SAARC region, the Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature aims at the cultural connectivity through literary and cultural interface with a view to enhance the level of peace and tranquility among the SAARC nations. Since 1987, FOSWAL has been consistently endeavoring to integrate the think tank of writers, thinkers, intellectuals, creative fraternity and peace activists who share similar sensibilities towards socio-cultural and political practices prevailing in SAARC member nations. The aim of this apex body has consistently been to highlight the common concerns through cultural exchanges, literature, film, folklores, visual arts, performing arts etc. Emphasizing the common concerns through translating creative works, seminar, conferences, celebrating literary festivals, publishing anthologies and journals, exploring and documenting the folklore culture, attempting for the preservation of the culture, FOSWAL has become the strong link among the state members of the region.

**SAARC literature in English:**

Despite the established nomenclature, “Commonwealth Literature”, which obviously denotes the sense: ‘writing of the writers from the formerly British colonies’, but is discarded by many scholars for various reasons, South Asian Literature is conferred new classification by the scholars with a view to familiarize the world with unexplored literary spirit and to strengthen the regional cooperation. SAARC writing in English, argues Ram Bhagwan Singh in the exceptional book *Creative Neighbours: SAARC Writing in English*, is neither parochial nor prejudicial classification; in fact, it is a new classification that assimilates literary traditions having the same composite Asian spirit. Refuting the possibilities of such classification based on economic cooperation, certain scholars may perceive the nomenclature SAARC literature skeptically; however, the fact that SAARC has expanded the association from mere economic cooperation to cultural integration adhere the new category of Literature. The endeavors of FOSWAL, the only SAARC Apex body, for assimilating and projecting the literary and creative writing of the region through various cultural programs and conferences can successfully resolve the scholarly skepticism about the classification of SAARC Literature.

Populated with diversifying mixed groups, the state members of the region share certain common languages; Urdu is a common language to India and Pakistan, Tamil to India and Sri Lanka, Bengali to India and Bangladesh and Pashtu to Afghanistan and Pakistan. English celebrates the status of an acquired language among all the state members of the SAARC; hence, the new literary classification, SAARC Writing in English, as well as translation of literature written in regional languages into English has gained considerable momentum. In addition to that, all the common languages of the region belong to Indo-European group and English is virtually a naturalized language in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh; therefore, an exclusive branch of creative writing, Indian Writing in English, is prevalent in India.

Ram Bhagwan Singh establishes an inextricable articulation of indigenous spirit in SAARC writing in English with a remark, “The SAARC country’s literature in English is a part of their country’s literature in as much as such literature, like any literature in general, has the local habitation and character” (Singh xii). The accentuated articulation of common Asian spirit, undercurrent cultural homogeneity and value system marks the SAARC Writing in English predominantly. In the Era of postcolonialism, the literary discourse, either originally written or a directly translated into English, pronounces the reciprocation of native populace against the value system, culture, history and knowledge system established by colonial powers. The discourse attempts to revisit the established norms and to explore the new parameters deep rooted in the history that has been manipulated softly by colonial discourse. SAARC discourse in English proclaims the indigenous identity of the region in against the well-celebrated one that was conferred meticulously by the western world in an attempt to dominate the region politically, culturally and economically. Despite the vehement proclaim of indigenusness in every discipline of knowledge system, SAARC English literature traces the current of globalism and frames the indigenous knowledge system in global relativities. Moreover, SAARC writing in English has been celebrated as a part of world literature

regardless the intense articulation of the nativity. In a way, the writers of the region explore the ancient knowledge system from the modern perspectives and attempt to assimilate cultural peculiarities in a global current while retaining the essence intact. To be more precise, SAARC writing in English narrativizes a dialogic discourse of native issues like nationalism globally. In so doing, the writers of the region articulate the distinct trends of nationalistic practices on larger scale with a view to discourse a dialogue regarding the native issue at global level. *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh and *The Broken Verses* by Kamila Shamsie are celebrated texts creating great impact on nationalism practiced in India and Pakistan respectively.

### **Analyzing Nationalism in *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh:**

Celebrated as a memory novel by many critics, *The Shadow Lines* penetrates into the perceptibility of the concept of nation and nationalism, geopolitical borders and actual idea of freedom while relating the historical references – Bangladesh partitions – to the fictitious plot in the backdrop. The text complicatedly narrates the plot of unnamed protagonist's quest for the truth related to the sudden death of his uncle Tridib. Staying in London for a research project, the unnamed narrator visits different places that he invented in his imagination during his childhood with peculiar assistance of his uncle Tridib and meets people with whom he is attached with strong memories. Narrating the familial history through memory layers of the unnamed narrator, the text unfolds the prevailing notions of nationalism through distinct characterizations.

The retired teacher and staunch adherent of vehement reaction against the Bangladesh Partition, Tha'ma – narrator's grandmother posit the idea of fiercely reactionary nationalism. Tha'ma considers sacrificing blood for nation as the key requirement for the nation building, for which she admires the British and aspires to adopt the British structure of Nationalism. Nation is the homeland, a birthplace or a place of origin that has existential significance and that construct as well as validate an individual's identity in conformation with that one of a larger group, which shares the same geographical area by birth. The socio-political-economic migration of people set individual's identity at odd with nation's identity. Considering nation as a birthplace, a place of origin, an individual attempt to fixate existential centrality imagining 'Home' and 'Nation' as a center. Positing the dictum of imagined community, Benedict Anderson observes:

The nation is an imagined political community. it is imagined because 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. This makes it possible for emotional affinities to transcend some disruptive dissonances, thereby making space for a sense of nationness and nationalism. (qtd. in Malathi 303)

Tha'ma remains emotionally attached with Dhaka, the people of Dhaka in her imagination despite the fact that it is partitioned and a foreign land to her now. She encounters an emotional clash within after the realization of the political partition, as her identity of being native of Dhaka is at the clash with her identity of being the citizen of Calcutta. Her hometown – Dhaka – is now a foreign land to her and she needs visa to visit her own birthplace. However, Tha'ma appears to have imagined irrevocable connection with her hometown and with the people whom she considers a part of her own community throughout the text, which is evidently visible in her concern for her uncle Jethamoshai, whom she imagines after receiving the news that her ancestral house has turned into a refugee camp to have surrounded by the enemy. The deep rooted religious sentiments and historical views of geopolitical partitions as well as old age Hindu-Muslim dichotomies provoke Tha'ma to view Muslim as an outsider and enemy to her homeland.

The growing concern for the increasing numbers of Muslims haunts her while visiting a locality in Calcutta to meet her distance relatives in order to fetch some news of her uncle and while visiting Dhaka to meet her uncle Jethamoshai with a view to bring him in safe place. Viewing the complete transformation of a locality in Calcutta, Tha'ma exclaims, "When I came here ten years ago, there were rice fields running alongside the road; it was the kind of place where rich Calcutta people built garden houses. And look at it now – as filthy as a babui's nest. It's all because of the refugees, flooding in like that" (Ghosh 145). By the term "refugees" she means the outsiders, most probably Muslims, as in anticipation of the jesting provocation about their status as refugees made by narrator's father, she remarks, "We're not refugees... on cues. We came long before Partition." (Ghosh 145)

Contrasting the radical ideologies pertaining to nationalism adhered by narrator's grandmother who believes in sacrificing life for motherland with that of the young generation of Tridib and narrator who share a transborder experience believing in diminishing nature of geopolitical borders, the text suggestively uncovers the futility of fundamentalism practiced for illusionary borders of the country. The characters from three distinct generations –



Tha'ma, Tridib and Ila are engaged with the distinct perspectival ideologies of freedom, independence and nationalism. Having been portrayed as fundamentalist, Tha'ma articulates ferocious patriotic emotions and entertains the idea of sacrificing life for the nation. Conducting a research on ancient Sena dynasty of Bengal, Tridib has earned historical vision that views the nation beyond the geopolitical borders. Being the part of the youngest generation, Ila lacks the sense of belonging to particularly one geographical place and entertains the feministic view of complete freedom of a feminine gender. In a way, the interactions of the unnamed narrator with Tridib, Ila and Tha'ma examine plural idea of nationalism.

Summarily, the text posits the interplay of the plural ideologies pertinent to nationalism by the means of placing cosmopolitan views on nationalism discoursed by the unnamed narrator, Tridib who, in one or another way, travel across the geopolitical border and extend their notion of nationalism parallel to jingoistic fervor of Tha'ma who has grave sense of past that determines her national identity.

### **Analyzing Nationalism in *The Broken Verses* by Kamila Shamsie:**

*The Broken Verses* by Kamila Shamsie narrativizes the protagonist's attempt to rediscover the past events that involves the political disappearance of her mother and a fatherly figure, a mentor known as the poet throughout the plot. In so doing, Aasmaani revisits the past events that stirred the country with political assertions of the government with a view to unravel the sudden disappearance of Samina Akram – her mother and political murder of Omi – the poet and Samina's lover. Aasmaani attempts not only to rediscover the mysterious past of her mother rummaging the political developments of the country in the backdrop but also strives to accomplish her own fragmented identity through the complete discovery of the past. The correspondence between Aasmaani's strife to accomplish as well as assert her identity and the identity of Pakistan as a whole nation postulates rise, development and distortion of nationalism.

Aasmaani receives few letters from Shehnaz Saeed – a veteran sensation of television world and a good friend to Samina, which are coded with calligraphic symbols. Familiar with the usual codes exchanged between Samina and the poet, Aasmaani attempts to decode the letters in order to have access to the actual cause of her mother's disappearance and the political assassination of the poet. In so doing, Aasmaani penetrates into the historical events of 1970s and 80s under the political administration of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Zia-Ul-Haq with a view to cognize the political activism of Samina and the poet that led them to supposed imprisonments, exile and political assassination. In a way, the text fictionalizes the popular trends of resistance in against the establishment: political and poetical. Shamsie has diplomatically narrativized twofold resistance: poetical and political by the means of poet's blazing poetic reactions and Samina Akram's blistering political activism against the governing forces that have failed to establish democracy in the nation.

The fictional protest against the Hudood Ordinance – that requires willing testimony of four pious religious male figures for the court trial against a rape accused led by Samina exhibits remonstrations against the injunctions of Islamic decrees in legal proceedings of the law. Hudood Ordinance refers to a law implemented by military ruler Zia-Ul-Haq as a part of the process of Islamisation in the year of 1979. The fictionalized incorporation of the unifying processes of militarism and Islamisation problematizes the issue of the rise of the religious nationalism as well as the deliberate exploitation of such spirit for the political gains. The political history of the nation records the intervals of military invasions in the democratic administration of Pakistani government that demonstrates a power hungry tug of war among such forces that calculatingly instigate the hegemony of Islamist fundamentalists in one or another way. At several junctures, the text narrates Aasmaani's encountering Islamist fundamentalist and struggling to assert her political as well as individual identity as a female. For instance, anticipating fiercely the debatable comments of Maulana Sahib, Samina uncovers the exploitation of Islam as a political tool and observes:

The subject is your obligations to the ummah. You take a territorial issue in Afghanistan and you make it into a matter of religious duty – you and your unlikely bedfellows in the West – and you spout phrases like “the unity of the ummah” as you hand those boys – those young, idealistic, confused, angry, devout, ready-to-be-brainwashed boys – the most sophisticated weapons and the best combat training in the world and tell them to get the infidel Soviets off Muslim soil. (Shamsie 286)

Exposing the latent practice of politicizing religious sentiments of polity of the nation, Samina staunchly poses questions of contemplations regarding the fate of “global guerrillas”, who are raised by religious institutions for achieving political agendas and defies sensationalizing the soil-religion association observing remarkably, “Soil has

no religion, Maulana” (Shamsie 286). Shamsie has exposed the conventional practice of exploiting religion as a political tool that controls the rise, spread and hegemony of nationalistic sentiments of the people.

In an interview with Helen Brown, Kamila Shamsie comments on the general nature of the Pakistanis, “Pakistan is a nation in which people are much more likely to give a strong opinion on things... There’s much less diffidence of expression” (Brown, para.8). People have general tendency to form political opinions and to view all the phenomenon with binocular of nationalistic fervor. At a juncture in the text, Shamsie has validly fictionalized the general notion of the people that determines the parameters of nationalism and logical reaction of intelligentsia to such euphoric sentiments. Pronouncing euphoric notion of nationalism prevailing among the common people of the nation, Samina observes, “I’ve never liked mangoes. People say it means I’m not a true Pakistani, but I’ve never liked mangoes. Nothing to be done about it, and frankly I don’t see why I should bother to try. The way I see it I’m just expanding people’s notions of what it means to be Pakistani” (Shamsie 296-297). In a way, the text posits the hegemonic perceptions of nationalism and intellectual skepticism raised in against religious nationalistic fervor.

To conclude, SAARC Literature in English, with special reference to two eminent select texts from India and Pakistan, discourses correspondence between two nationalistic thought processes: the assertion of religious identity of the nation by the means of exploiting ancient religious ideologies and identification as well as assertion of modern secular identity through fighting for constitutional rights. In a way, SAARC literature in English narrativizes the conflicting ideologies pertinent to nationalism; for instance, constitutional nationalism, triggered during anti-colonial era, that emphasizes secularism embracing diversity and religious nationalism that accentuates the revival of ancient religio-cultural ideologies in favor of asserting the indigenous identity.

**Work cited:**

1. Brown, Helen. “A Writer’s Life: Kamila Shamsie”. *The Telegraph*. 10 Apr. 2005, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3640134/A-writers-life-Kamila-Shamsie.html> . Accessed 14 June 2019.
2. Fernandes, Denzil. “Religious Nationalism in South Asia” *Social Action: A Quarterly Review of Social Trends*. 67.2 (April – June 2017): i-vi. Print.
3. Ghosh, Amitav. *The Shadow Lines*. Penguin Books, 2009. Print.
4. Malathi, R. Nation as Identity in Amitav Ghosh’s the Shadow Lines. *The Dawn Journal*, vol.2 No.1, January –June 2013. pp. 301- 308.
5. Shamsie, Kamila. *Boken Verses*. Bloomsbury, 2005. Print.
6. Singh, Ram Bhagwan. *Creative Neighbours: SAARC Writing in English*. Kolkata: Towards Freedom, 2007.