CHAPTER III
THE SHADOW LINES
The very beginning of *The Shadow Lines* is significant to understand the novel: “In 1939, thirteen years before I was born, my father’s aunt, Mayadebi, went to England with her husband and her son, Tridib” (3). It is quite appropriate to say that the novel begins as a recollection of events that have taken place not in the life of the narrator but in some one else’s. It is also important to note that there is a very rich narrative texture. The story is told in layers, mixture of private and public events working towards unity. It is, however, very difficult to define the theme, perhaps at the same time very easy to do so, for, it is a novel of “search” – search for self-knowledge and self-identity. Though the novel is written in the first person, we never come to know the name of the person even after the novel is read completely. There seems to be a deliberate attempt on the part of the novelist that the reader should not try to find out the name of the story teller. For Ghosh the story teller is not only an individual but also the supreme consciousness that pervades the life of every individual. So, the narrator says, “I knew that a part of my life as a human being had ceased: that I no longer existed, but as a chronicle” (112).

This supreme consciousness or the individual consciousness becomes a battlefield in which there is no victory or defeat. The narrator describes the events that he had heard from Tridib- his cousin now deceased- when he is eight and undertakes a journey. It is therefore quite appropriate to call Tridib the mentor and alter ego of the narrator. When the narrator begins to identify himself with Tridib, the narrator’s grandmother chides him, for, she does not approve of Tridib. For the grandmother Tridib is a “loafer and wastrel” (3) who wastes his time:

In my grandmother’s usage there was nothing very much worse that could be said of any one. For her time was like a toothbrush: it went mouldy if it wasn’t used. I asked her once what happened to wasted
time. She tossed her small silvery head, screwed up her long nose and said: It begins to stink.

As for herself, she had been careful to rid our little flat of everything that might encourage us to let our time stink. No chess-board or any pack of cards ever came through our door; there was a battered Ludo set somewhere but I was only allowed to play with it when I was ill. She didn’t even approve of my mother listening to the afternoon radio play more than once a week. In our flat all of us worked hard at whatever we did: my grandmother at her school mistressing; I at my homework; my mother at housekeeping, my father at his job as a junior executive in a company which dealt in vulcanized rubber.

Our time wasn’t given the slightest opportunity to grow mouldy. That was why I loved to listen to Tridib: he never seemed to use his time, but his time didn’t stink. (4)

In *The Shadow Lines* the action takes place in different continents – Europe, Asia, and Africa – and in different countries – India, Bangladesh, and England. The novel is divided into two parts: “Going Away” and “Coming Home.” There is a shift of time from the past to the present and from the present to the past. “Going Away” can be interpreted as “going away from the self” and “Coming Home” can be interpreted as “coming back into the self”; So, there is the concept called “coming and going” (not belonging) which is expressed as part of family’s secret lore:

You see, in our family we don’t know whether we are coming or going – it’s all my grandmother’s fault. But of course, the fault wasn’t hers at all: it lay in language. Every language assumes a centrality, a fixed and settled point to go away from and come back to, and what my grandmother was looking for was a word for a journey which was not a coming or a going at all; a journey that was a search for precisely that fixed point which permits the proper use of verbs of movement. (153)
As P.D. Dube observes, “…one is constantly plagued by doubts in the novel as to whether the characters are going to Calcutta or coming to Calcutta or coming to London or going back to London. The two parts of the novel indicate this enigma of ‘non-belonging.’ When the dwelling place is uncertain, borders also compound the problem.”¹ Joshi also says that the novel is arranged in such a way that important situations/incidents come after a “prelude as if to provide a catalyst for the narrator’s memories.”²

*The shadow Lines* tells the story of the narrator’s family of three generations which are spread over London, Dhaka, and Calcutta, and draws characters from different nationalities, cultures, and religions in the world. The first generation is represented by the grandmother Tha’mma, Jethamoshai, Mayadebi, and Saheb. The father, the mother, and Jatin represent the second generation. May, Nick, Ila, and the unidentified narrator represent the third generation.

Ghosh employs an educated young man who frequently travels between Calcutta and London in 1981 to narrate the story. As mentioned earlier, the story contains many layers—multiple stories to be precise: stories of his grandmother and her sister, of his uncles Tridib and Robi, of his cousin Ila, who married an Englishman, and of May Price, a family friend in London.

The novel depicts urban middle class life. For urban middle class, education and professional jobs are important. These people are addicted to work because education and profession only see to it that they earn their daily morsel. The work environment so moulds them that they cultivate the virtues of hard work, obedience, saying yes to all the dictates of the boss; and thus they zealously fall in line with the norms of society. But this class of society gets seriously disturbed when misfortunes strike them. For them, life ceases to exist when struck by the sudden eruption of
violence like a volcano in public sphere. In these cases life for them loses all its meaning and comes to a standstill. The two parts – “Going Away” (3-112) and “Coming Home” (115-252) – are used to refer to going and coming with home as the central symbol, a place where one is born and brought up and is deeply attached to. This attachment is more so if one is away from home for a long time for different reasons. The feeling of “citizen of the world” may be ideal, but it is not within the reach of all people. They either go away from their home or come home. We find that characters in *The Shadow Lines* go away from homes in Calcutta or Dhaka or come home to Calcutta or Dhaka. But what transpires to them at the end is that peace is as elusive as ever, wherever they are – either at home or abroad.

Tha’mma may be said to be the central character of the novel. It may even be said that the novel, in fact, is her story. Tridib calls her a modern middle-class woman. Like all middle-class women, Tha’mma wants to lead a trouble-free life; she is a great patriot and believes in the unity of the country. But she becomes a sort of a rebel when the life that she wants to live is denied to her by the cruel fate of time. She spends most part of life in Calcutta, but she becomes a witness to a most horrible scene when she visits Dhaka to bring back her uncle. In that visit her aged uncle and also her nephew meet tragic death. She becomes a sort of dangling woman suspended by the history. The story Tha’mma is told to the narrator by herself (121-26). She was born in Dhaka, and grew up as a member of

…a big joint family then, with everyone living and eating together: her grandparents, her parents, she and Mayadebi, her Jethamoshai – her father’s elder brother—and his family, which included three cousins of roughly her own age, as well as a couple of spinster aunts. She remembered her grandfather, although she had only been six when he died: a thin, stern looking man with a frown etched permanently into
his forehead. In his presence everyone, including her father and Jethamoshai, spoke in whispers, with their heads down and their eyes fixed firmly on the floor. But when he left the house for the district courts, where he practiced as an advocate, the house would erupt with the noisy games of the five cousins. Every evening the five children would be led by their mothers into his study, where they would each have to recite their alphabets – Bengali first and then English – with their hands held out, palm downwards, and he would rap them on the knuckles with the handle of his umbrella every time they made a mistake. If they cried they were rapped on their shins. (121)

But as it almost always happens, the ancestral house had to be partitioned, after the death of her grandfather. She came to know about the terrorist movements in Bengal which was in fact the nationalist movement to free India from the clutches of the British imperial regime: “about secret terrorist societies like Anushilan and Jugantar and all their off-shoots, their clandestine networks, and the home-made bombs with which they tried to assassinate British officials and policemen; and a little about the arrests, deportations and executions with which the British had retaliated” (37).

She was studying B.A. in History in Dhaka. She had a great liking for revolutionaries like Kudhiram Bose and Bagha Jatin, and in her young romantic imagination had even wanted to become a revolutionary. A shy young man of her class was arrested on the charges of conspiring to kill an English magistrate. He was tried and deported to the cellular jail in the Andamans:

She’d been expecting a huge man with burning eyes and a lion’s mane of a beard, and there he was, all the while, at the back of her class, sitting shyly by himself. She could so easily have talked to him. He would have been handsome too, she had decided later, if only he would shave that beard of his. Lying in her bed, she would think to herself – if
only she had known, if only she had been working with him, she would have warned him somehow, she would have saved him, she would have gone to Khulna with him too, and stood at his side, with a pistol in her hands, waiting for that English magistrate…. (39)

She wanted to work for the revolutionaries, to run errands for them, cook their food, and wash their clothes because they were fighting the enemy of the country. When the narrator asks her whether she would have killed the English magistrate, she replies, “I would have been frightened…. But I would have prayed for strength, and god willing, yes, I would have killed him. It was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free” (39).

But all her romantic sojourn with revolution came to an end when she was married off and went to Burma. Her married life also proved to be short-lived, as she bore a child in 1925 and became a widow in 1935 when she was just 32. She had to start a new phase of life in Calcutta as a school teacher in 1936 to fend for herself. There is not much depiction of her life from here onwards, and the reader is expected to construct the story from the links dropped by the author now and then. She had to live in a one-room tenement in Bhowanipore. She would dream of “the old house, her parents, Jethamoshai [her uncle], her childhood” (125) in Dhaka, but she could never go there. The saga of partition and the attendant problems of refugees had no direct impact on her life as she had left Dhaka long back. She had more pressing problems in getting her son educated, declining the help offered by her sister. The next happenings of her life – her son getting employment in a private company, his marriage, the birth of a grandson in 1952, her own retirement in 1962 as the headmistress of the school she had joined – are all revealed in an indirect way.

Thus Ghosh portrays Tha’mma as a typical middle-class Indian, suffering and braving odds that confront her. She can be considered the real heroine of the novel
with all her peculiarities. She is a sincere, heard working, and time-conscious lady for whom wasting one’s time is an inexcusable crime. She tells the narrator, her grandson, that if one wastes time, it starts stinking. The typical middle-class Indian mindset is revealed when she refuses help from her sister. As the narrator senses:

… the fears she had accumulated in the long years after my grandfather’s premature death, when she had had to take her school teaching job in order to educate my father: I could guess at a little of what it had cost her then to refuse her rich sister’s help and of the wealth of pride it had earned her, and I knew intuitively that all that had kept her from agreeing at once was her fear of accepting anything from anyone that she could not return in exact measure. (33)

This mindset is in contrast with both upper and lower class of society as the former is used to receiving favours, where as the latter cannot deny on account of its helplessness. We can also sense a kind of a feminist in Tha’mma. For her, all men are like Tridib: “… at heart she believed that all men would be like him if it were not for their mothers and wives” (6). As a teacher, she was sincere and innovative. She was always working to develop new techniques and methods for the benefit of her students. As the narrator says:

When she was headmistress my grandmother had decided once that every girl who opted for Home Science ought to be taught how to cook at least one dish that was a specialty of some part of the country other than her own. It would be a good way, she thought, of teaching them about the diversity and vastness of the country. (116)

Tha’mma’s character can be said to be a tribute to many unrecognized women who are responsible for the growth and sustenance of “family” in our country. Though she loves and shows concern for the narrator, she can never reconcile herself to the breach in his character. When he visits her on hearing news of her ill health, she
acccuses him of his worshipping of Ilã and visiting cheap women in Delhi. The narrator is shocked at what he considers her cruelty. Adding to this, just before her death, she writes a letter to the principal of the college where her grandson (the narrator) is studying to oust him from the college, citing his unethical conduct. Of course, the narrator is able to “convince” the principal of his conduct blaming the sickness that might have affected Tha’mma’s reasoning faculty. The narrator thinks, “I have never understood how she learnt of the women I had visited a couple of times, with my friends; nor do I know how she saw that I was in love with Ilã so long before I dared to admit it to myself” (93).

Though Tha’mma’s is very strict as far as spending time is concerned till her retirement, after that with “stinking time,” she gets deviated from her path. She gets overpowered by her thoughts about family, her uncle in Bangladesh, and others. This new change in her life costs her dearly, for this “change” claims a precious, young life. Tha’mma takes up a “mission” in her old age. This is to find and bring back her uncle Jethemoshai in Bangladesh. She says, “It doesn’t matter we recognize each other or not. We’re the same flesh, the same blood, the same bone, and now at last, after all these years, perhaps will be able to make amends for all that bitterness and hatred” (129). She is at loss to understand the evil in humans. It is well said that old bitterness cannot be put to an end, try how well one might be. But Tha’mma only succeeds to meet Jethamoshai, now a man without any memory. At first he fails to recognize her, but when Tridib reminds him of his connection with them, he suddenly recognizes: “The old man’s face lit up. They died! he said, his voice quivering in triumph. They had two daughters: one with a face like a vulture, and another one who was as poisonous as a cobra but all pretty and goody-goody to look at” (214). The irony is this old man is spitting venom against the same people who have come to
rescue him from the wretched life he has been leading. In this attempt, they are also going to lose a very precious life! Tha’mma’s visit to Dhaka can be said to be her hamartia and she has to pay for that. It is her new passion for relatives that brings doom on them. Tridib, Jethamoshai, and Khalil, the rickshaw-puller get killed in the communal frenzy when they try to return to India from Dhaka after convincing Jethamoshai to accompany them. This tragic incident has its own bearing on the psyche of Tha’mma, for her perception of human relations changes drastically indeed. This lady, who has been talking about peaceful co-existence among people of different countries hitherto, begins talking about a kind of pre-emptive strike to keep Indians safe. She donates her gold chain to the fund for war. When the narrator questions her about her decision of donating the chain, she emotionally says, “We have to kill them before they kill us; we have to wipe them out” (237).

Childhood is one of the major themes of *The Shadow Lines*. Tridib, the narrator’s older cousin, exerts a great influence on the narrator. The narrator looks at the world with Tridib’s eyes, which have a kind of detached sensibility. For the narrator, Tridib is a perfect role model as he tries to identify himself with Tridib. The narrator says, “I was nervous now: I could see that he was waiting to hear what I’d have to say, and I didn’t want to disappoint him” (28). The narrator’s identity takes shape in and through his responses to the characters he engages with and the responses he elicits. He remains unnamed and the reader constructs his image and physical traits by events narrated.

Great fiction bases itself on human psychology. This is quite natural. So, it also appears some times that these novelists might have smuggled psychological precepts from texts of psychology. In psychoanalytical literature, castration fear in male children is a major theme. This is exploited by Tridib when he tells a story to the
narrator and Robi: “He (Tridib) had smiled and gone on to tell us in ghastly detail about the circumcision rites of one of the desert tribes. And then, spectacles glinting, he had said: So before you leave you’d better decide whether you would care to have all that done to your little wee-wees, just in case you’re captured” (19). There is also what is known as coming together of complexes in childhood and growing. The narrator’s relatives come from different places and with different stories to tell. The complex has such a great impact on the narrator that he cannot think of these people as his blood relations; he says, “...I could not bring myself to believe that their worth in my eyes could be reduced to something so arbitrary and unimportant as a blood relationship” (3). This can be the reason why the narrator fails to establish any relationship with Ilia. He is noticed only when Ilia’s relationship with Nick gets spoiled. The narrator falls a prey to inferiority complex when he compares himself with Nick. Ilia says, “He is very big. Much bigger than you: much stronger too. He’s twelve, three years older than us” (49). Life changes for the narrator with this encounter:

...after that day Nick Price, whom I had never seen, and would, as far as I knew, never see, became a spectral presence beside me in my looking glass; growing with me, but always bigger and better, and in some way more desirable – I did not know what, except that it was so in Ilia’s eyes and therefore true. (50)

The narrator’s relationship with Ilia is only one sided. He wants Ilia, but Ilia is not interested. Maybe the narrator’s middle-class family background is the reason. Another significant peep into child-psychology is exemplified by the narrator’s coming to know about Tradib’s death. Tradib was very close to the narrator, as his friend, philosopher, and guide. His influence on the narrator is immense. Yet when he comes to know about his death, “I felt nothing – no shock, no grief. I did not
understand that I would never see him again; my mind was not large enough to accommodate so complete an absence” (239). This feeling is also experienced by many children. So, when a person dies, they innocently ask questions like “Why are you crying?” or “Why is grandpa lying like that?” The elders cannot answer such questions because they do not know what to say.

Irony of fate works in matters of love. Pain comes mainly because of love. Love eludes definition. Love is a kind of emotion that centres on a single individual. This individual could be mother, father, sister, brother, or any one. So, it is a wrong notion that love exists only for a suitable mating partner or the opposite sex. Love has a very wide scope and is very much misunderstood. Another aspect is that love demands suspension of logic. Love and logic are natural enemies and so are love and other rationalities – equality, justice, etc. So, when one is irrational, the mindset will be uncertain, exited, and confused. When an individual thinks only of himself/herself, discarding others, control over emotional life gets disturbed. By looking at love from this angle, one can say that the narrator is in love with Tridib, Tha’mma, and more so with Ila, his eccentric cousin.

It may be appropriate to say here that the narrator fails to get back the love in the same measure he shows to others. He gets what is known as reciprocity. Tridib reciprocates his hero-worship to an extent; May drains the very meaning of his life: “I was jealous, achingly jealous, as only a child can be, because it had always been my unique privilege to understand Tridib, and that day at the Victoria Memorial I knew I had lost that privilege; somehow May had stolen it from me” (170). With Tha’mma also his relationship gets strained. This is because Tha’mma never changes her rules or code of conduct. He tries to shake off the chains of his body: “I jerked my head out of her hands. She met my gaze and smiled. I could not believe that this withered,
wasted, powerless woman was the same person that I had so much loved and feared” (91). This is how the relationship breaks. With Ila, there seems to be no way for any reciprocity since she was not at all concerned about the narrator. In London, he spends much time trying to talk to her, see her, and hear her speak but in vain. The narrator explains the connection between love and human tendency to “enumerate and quantify” (95). The novel here expresses the complexity of love. Love cannot be “purchased” with gifts; it just happens. So, applying the ordinary ruler of wealth and power to normalize it is a mistake. By applying “the metaphors of normality,” (96) we expect justice in love. But it does not turn out that way. The narrator tries his best to get Ila’s attention and reciprocation. But, what he gets is:

She would open the door and say – Nice to see you, come in, but I hope you’re not expecting any dinner – and I would tell her, smiling brightly – I’ve walked eight miles, it took me exactly two hours and ten minutes – and she would arch her eyebrows in surprise and say: Why? Is it some kind of health kick? (96)

Ila does not reciprocate for the one who loves her so passionately. She loves Nick, who is not sincere in his love. This is the baffling aspect of love.

*The Shadow Lines* suggests multiples ideas. It has to do with trans-border situations. It has also got relevance to the civilization-growth and international borders. The title suggests that all lines are shadow lines; they are not real. The very notion of modern nation states has been questioned. According to the author these lines only succeed in dividing people, not uniting them. The very concept of nationhood is a mirage since it is not logically based. The lines drawn by nature in the form of mountains, oceans, and rivers are real. But lines drawn by humans in the form of borders are shallow and hence unjustifiable. Jethamoshai speaks well when
Tha’mma and others ask him to return to India:

Once you start moving you never stop. That’s what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: I don’t believe in this India-Shindia. It’s all very well, you’re going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have you any where. As for me, I was born here, and I’ll die here. (215)

Being rooted is a great idea and Amitav Ghosh conveys this through Tha’mma. The message of living in one’s own country is very subtly said in the novel. Ila’s sad experience is attributed to living in an alien land. It was bound to happen; one can see that she has no right to be there; she does not belong there. But for people like Ila, India does not hold any fascination. For her India is a backward country full of superstitions, restrictions, and conservative outlook. She tells the narrator that she wants to be part of greater events. The present culture has lost the sanctity and has become shallow. This is what the author is trying to point out here. An incident in the night club clearly illustrates this aspect. When Ila goes to a night club with Robi and the narrator, she starts flirting with a two businessmen. Unable to control himself, Robi pushes one of them. The mirth stops and the trio move out. Ila is very annoyed and humiliated. She shouts:

Do you see now why I’ve chosen to live in London? Do you see? It’s only because I want to be free.

Free of what? I said.

Free of you! She shouted back. Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you. (88-89)

One view is that women are naturally attracted to power. They have the desire to conquer the world through their mates. This may be partly because of the restriction imposed on women to confine themselves to the house. This domestic
domain seems to create cunningness in women. The narrator says that housewives accumulate “manipulative worldliness” (169). Maybe it is their only tool of survival. The author means to say that this is what happens if a woman is restricted to the chores and domestic existence. However the role of housewife is depicted with all its grace. The narrator’s mother showers great care and attention on his father. He enjoys the bliss of conventional married life. There is a description of how the narrator’s mother waits for her husband, how she brings the dress for him, how the wifely atmosphere is so touching. According to Coomaraswamy, “A single generation of English education suffices to break the threads of tradition and to create a nondescript supercritical being deprived of all roots.” Ila seems to be a product of this kind of education. She rejects her roots, her relatives, her cars, and servants in India and seeks an identity for herself all alone in an alien land because she wants “to be free” (92).

This passage clearly portrays our present culture. The present generation wants to be free – free from commitments, free from relationships, free from everything. Live for your own self – that seems to be the motto. So naturally these crazy generations cannot taste the nectar of true love, which demands surrender without any conditions. The bliss of experiencing the true love is simply beyond their reach.

Perhaps the most disturbing feature of The Shadow Lines is the tension between Hindu and Muslim communities as result of communal hatred and seeds of partition. The riots that follow tensions lead to destruction of property, public as well as private. But as long as one is a mere spectator to this violence, there seems to be not much of a problem, but if one gets caught in this, s/he understands the real problem. Riots and their components – panic, fear, rumour, and hatred – are shown to be the same everywhere. The response of children to these riots is shown in vividness.
They are struck with fear. The narrator says, “The streets had turned themselves inside out: our city had turned against us” (203).

It is very difficult to say whether this novel has got an organic unity. The first part consists of 16 sections, whereas the second part consists of 15 sections. There seems to be no proper beginning, middle or ending. As Nivedita Bagchi observes: “The ‘story’ or the chief narrative line evolves sporadically and is constantly interrupted and diverted by other narratives. The only fixed centre is that of the chief narrative voice through whom the other narratives are filtered.” For example the narrator shuttles between Calcutta and London and also across the loom of time from 1981 to 1960s on to 1940 and even earlier. The revelation of Tridib’s death to the narrator has a great impact –It is a timeless moment in the shattered psyche of the entire family.

This novel is also great because of its kaleidoscopic presentation of India. The author’s compassion for India, albeit with his own reservations, does not leave him. The importance of Hindi songs, the role of cricket in India, Indian women’s love for gold and ornaments – everything is put beautifully in this book. The narrator, for example, wants to see Ila in western outfits. If she wears the typical Bengali dress – white sari with red border – for him she looks just like an ordinary next-door girl. He repeatedly comments on her western dresses: “She was wearing clothes the like of which I had never seen before, English clothes” (43). Again, “She looked improbably exotic to me, dressed in faded blue jeans and a T shirt – like no girl I had ever seen before except in pictures in American magazines” (81).

The male domain of watching girls and women –also known as bird watching – is very beautifully described. The cultural connotations come to the mind if one reads the narrator’s account of watching Ila: “She was walking slowly, looking down
at the pavement, preoccupied, oblivious of the people who stopped to stare at her. I pushed myself back against the pillar, willing her not to see me; I wanted to watch her walking, unselfconscious, for as long as possible” (180). Valuable information about women in India and women in general can also be got by reading *The Shadow Lines*. The narrator’s mother is fascinated by Saheb and his power when this gentleman talks with her: “My mother was touched that so important and distinguished a man should take so keen an interest in such trivial and unlikely matters” (40-41).

Ghosh seems to acknowledge in this novel that he no longer believes that a remedy for the world’s ills can be found by escaping into a world of imagination where all lines between human beings are merely shadow lines; or into a reconstructed past, as in *In An Antique Land*; or into a transcendental state of immorality, as in *The Calcutta Chromosome*.

It is pronounced that *The Shadow Lines* is a memory novel where the shadow of the past over-hangs the present. No character is able to detach itself from the past and present its identity to the present, i.e., their identity is marred by the past. All the deep burned secrets of the past present themselves nakedly to every character and thus help them to construct a new future for themselves which is more meaningful. Time is boundless and limitless in this novel, and as Mary Mount remarks about Amitav, “He is the most original of the lot. No body links time and space like him. He’ll stand the test of time.”

*The Shadow Lines* uses the notion of the “double” with all its connotations of complicity, betrayal, love, guilt, and mystery as its structural narrative centre. The obvious reference is to Joseph Conrad’s famous story “The Shadow Line.” The first person singular nameless narrator of the story is the mirror image of the self of Tridib. In fact, as we read the novel, we come across twin heroes – one hero narrating the
story and the other participating in the action. As it has already been stated, the story begins even before the narrator is born, and, significantly, he is not given any name. The story is of the individual self sucked into history and public events; as a consequence, absurdly enough one is either totally obliterated like Tridib or left badly scarred like the narrator. Ghosh draws heavily from his personal experience and brings in collision personal lives and public happenings with locales shifting and merging between Calcutta, London, and Dhaka.

Amitav Ghosh creates from the world within and from the world without. The narrator of the novel goes into the self –turns inwards in search of meaning out of the irrationality and absurdity of the prevailing human condition. He questions the very idea of political freedom in the modern world and the force of nationalism which draws in innumerable shadow lines between people and places and becomes the source of terrifying violence annihilating the self. In The Shadow Lines, Ghosh’s own self manifests itself in the form of the twin protagonists – Tridib and the narrator – investigating the individual self against the forces of history and world’s political reality. Because the individual self is more and more endangered in the modern world, the autobiographical element in the modern fiction has become more pronounced. For the discovery of the self, both past and future beyond one’s immediate experiences are required. Howard Wolf observes:

The field of experience beyond one’s immediate boundaries both past and future –becomes a more demanding standard by which the self discovers and tests itself in looking inward or outward, the autobiographical writer finds traces of its opposite: Self yields history, history yields self. In either case, the writer is tested: In discovering history in the self, the writer’s conscience is tested, for he must now judge his actions by a scale larger than his own; by discovering self in
history, the autobiographical writer must face the impersonality of his experience, wound to the ego.\textsuperscript{6}

This is very true of all writers, particularly of writers of fiction.

Amitav Ghosh alternates past and present to place the self in “history” – history that unfolds the full meaning of the present and an insight into future. The nameless narrator goes to England on a year’s research grant to collect material from the Indian Office for a PhD thesis on the “Textile Trade between India and England in the Nineteenth Century.” He meets May, Tridib’s English girl-friend seventeen years after her own visit to India. While eating dinner at May’s place, the narrator discovers that in 1959 when Tridib was twenty seven and May nineteen they had begun a long correspondence which developed into an intimate relationship. That night the narrator comes to know that Tridib had received May’s photograph the day he told his friends at Gole Park the made-up story of his relatives in London and his marriage with May.

The story in the novel is told in the first person. The Calcutta locale and environs of the upper middle class family are portrayed with authenticity and vividness, and yet the protagonist remains, strangely enough, a vague, undefined, unobtrusive, and unassertive person almost to the very end. The story moves back and forth in an extremely unusual but effective association of incidents; the protagonist is almost always present. But he is never the prime mover nor apparently crucially essential to the action. But he is there; always as a consciousness within which everything exists.

This passivity, almost anonymity, perplexes the reader but never really annoys him. Somehow the reader is made to sense that this anonymity is deliberate and is a consequence of a serious purpose. It is almost at the very end that the protagonist emerges from the shadows, the shadows of Ila and Tridib and it is then that we realize
why he had been kept away from the focus. We are never allowed to get fully acquainted with the protagonist because he himself had not fully recognized or understood himself. The novel, therefore, is a quest to explore and to come to terms with his (the narrator’s) self-consciousness and the moral milieu and the intellectual climate which have shaped his consciousness. As he so tellingly says, “...I no longer existed, but as a chronicle” (112).

He sets out with no preconceived notions or predetermined categories, but he explores his heart and those of others, who, he feels, are extensions of his own self; he ransacks his own memory so that he may discover and come to terms with himself.

The multifarious infrastructure of The Shadow Lines – chronological, geographical, cultural, and political – is broad enough to make it, with in its limitations, something like a microcosm of the world. Its events and characters extend over some countries which are on the whole more important for us than the others – India (undivided and divided), England, and the USA. The “India” of the novel, its main theatre, extends in time from the early thirties to the middle sixties with a profoundly illuminating extension up to the late seventies, thus splashing on the screen of the novel the period of half-a-century from the 1930s to the late 70s, a momentous period of events involving characters belonging to different countries, age groups, mental make-ups and social strata, and focusing on a large family initially united, then divided and then, after a re-union too brief, ending with a chilling tragedy. But noticeably, neither its protagonist nor the narrator live through the whole period – one dying too early and the other being born too late. This unusual structuring makes the narration with an omniscient narrator a challenge, and also suggests that the real emphasis of the novel is neither on the plot nor on characters as such but on the ideas and concepts. The protagonist Tridib – the etymology of whose
name (Tridev) implying a combination of all the three deities of creation, preservation, and annihilation followed by a new creation – seems to suggest the eternity and indivisibility of time, while the anonymity of the narrator, who – pervading the whole universe of what he sees, what he hears and what he imagines – may be interpreted as a symbol of space which fills and permeates the whole universe indulging all its objects from their outside to their very depth.

The multi-faceted perspective of the narrator seems to bear a close resemblance to that of the cosmopolitan author who in his different works moves from place to place. T.S. Eliot expresses the continuum of time in his *Four Quartets* thus:

Time present and time past
Are both present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.7

It may be told that foretelling the future or recalling the past of an unknown person is not possible. But literary authors have made at least the backward travel in time possible through the uncoiling of memory and the play of imagination. Ghosh has manipulated what is material through these speedy psychological processes which appear to compete with the speed of light. The narration is remarkably fine tuned with the present intermingled with the past so inextricably that it is difficult to separate the one from the other:

Those empty corners filled up with remembered forms, with the ghosts who had been handed down to me by time: the ghost of nine-year-old Tridib, sitting on a camp bed, just as I was, his small face intent, listening to the bombs; the ghost of Snipe in that far corner, near his medicine chest, worrying about his dentures; the ghost of the eight-year-old Ila, sitting with me under that vast table in Raibajar. They were all around me, we were together at last, not ghosts at all: the
ghostliness was merely the absence of time and distance – for that is all that a ghost is, a presence displaced in time. (181)

I see it in the mouths of the ghosts that surround me in the cellar: of Snipe, telling it to Tridib, of Tridib telling it to Ila and me, in that underground room in Raibajar; I see myself, three years later, taking May, the young May, to visit the house in Raibajar the day before she left for Dhaka with my grandmother and Tridib. (185-186)

Thus we see that time seems to exist in one block through which one can travel from the future to the present and the past and back to a more distant future. Imagination or memory in fiction makes time-travel a reality unlike the one in Einstein’s theory in which one has to perform the impossible, viz., exceeding the velocity of light. Ghosh combines memories of characters to make the past more realistic, as in the case of the snake seen by Ila and the incident probably described to the narrator already.

The issues such as time, freedom, and history are related to postmodernist thought. Jean-Francois Lyotard defines “Postmodernism” as “incredulity towards met a narratives.” The politics of the postmodern thus includes debunking absolute truths and realities; focusing on differences rather than totalities. The novel also focuses on various aspects of freedom, which are treated as a number of competing discourses. The narrative form, time sequence, and plot merge together to highlight the ambivalence of the above mentioned issues. The narrative does not follow a linear pattern of time sequence and arrangement of incidents. The back and forth movement of the narrative and the story told in scattered pieces reflect the fragmental thought processes of the narrator’s mind. The incidents are scattered in time as well as space. There is a sudden shift from Calcutta to Dhaka to London without an account of a proper sequence of time, which ranges from 1939 (the year Tridib first went to
England) to 1964 (the year Tridib died) and 15 years after that when the mystery of Tridib’s death is resolved. Similarly, the narrator is a child or an adolescent at times, while at other times he is a mature adult.

The Shadow Lines are not only boundaries between nations; they are also the lines which separate human beings from one another. Moreover, they are deceptive (therefore “shadow” lines) because the most intimate relationships end in distaste and estrangement (Ila and the narrator), and surprisingly strangers across-the-seas become most intimate friends (Tridib and May). Time, space, human emotions, and even freedom are dynamic forces. Therefore, every notion of freedom is as fictitious as it is real.

The narrative attempts at breaking away from constraints of time and space; nevertheless it forms a coherent whole. Through the coherent plot Ghosh tries to show the incoherence of reality which can only be grasped in the process of narrativizing. Thus, within a single story, the writer shows how each character lives in the story of his/her making. As mentioned earlier, the novel is divided into two sections. The first section, “Going Away,” ends with the narrator’s coming face to face with Ila’s indifference towards him. It also ends on a note that Ila possessed his life and her going away meant death to him. The second section, “Coming Home,” ends with the narrator’s regaining self-possession; his getting over his love for Ila, union with May, and acceptance of Tridib’s death. The incidents taking place in India as well as abroad are scattered all over the novel. Yet they are coherent and create a structured plot.

Infact, difference or distance of one place from another does not matter for any character in the novel. Even the grandmother ultimately finds her own old Dhaka in the large complex of the new city. She basically embodies the union of the two places, Calcutta, and Dhaka. Her visit to Dhaka is both “going” and “coming” to the
amusement of others – coming to her ancestral house for the first time as a “bride” and going as a “widow.” Her paradoxical status as a “widowed bride” and her choice of a plain white sari with red border are symbolic of the underlying unity of time and place which, though initially puzzling to her, harmonizes remarkably well. Spatial oneness seems to emerge from the author’s division of the novel into two parts. “Going” and “coming,” used probably for Calcutta and Dhaka, seems to demonstrate that the man-made divisions of space are artificial artistically, scientifically, and philosophically.

Eudora Welty’s observation, made in another context in the article “Place in Fiction,” seems to be quite relevant here: “There are as many ways of seeing a place as there are pairs of eyes to see it. Some times two places, two countries are brought to bear on each other … and the heart of the novel is heard beating most plainly, most passionately, most personally when two places are at meeting point.” Dhaka seems to be the crucible in which the relativistic discourse of the novel is tested and clarified. It is here that the heart of the novel beats most fervently, which, with the changing contexts of the three dimensions, seems to become four-dimensional at least for the grandmother, who reconcile herself only when she reaches the Dhaka of her nostalgic past.

_The Shadow Lines_ is a perfect specimen of partition. It has the story woven around the narrator’s grandmother, Tridib, Ilia, and May Price, with the pendulum of memory swinging from past into present and back into past. Every character’s deeds and actions leave an imprint on the mind of the other characters thereby helping the novel to grow and surpass the rigid barrier of time, place, and action. The narrative of the novel forces the reader to feel and understand various delicate issues like partition, inter-personal relationships, and religious cults. The narrator is always in awe of his
cousin Tridib and looks upon him as his role model. Ila, his niece who had been brought up in an aristocrat atmosphere of London, loves nothing but “her freedom” which the Indian culture always denies her. May Price –an alien possessed of love for India – would be going to Delhi and Agra first and then to Calcutta before flying to Dhaka. But the most impressive character who helps the narrative weave around the concept of memory and socio-political situation is the grandmother, who, after serving as headmistress, retires and begins her journey on roads of the faded memories, remembering her house in Dhaka.

The ghost of bygone times always continues to cling to every person in the novel, which never permits the novelist to lose touch with the fact that the memory forms the basis of the entire novel: “I cannot remember when it happened, any more than I remembered when I first learnt to tell the time or tie my shoe laces” (3). The very beginning seems to set the view into a clear perspective:

When I go past Gole Park now I often wonder whether that would happen today. I don’t know, I can’t tell: that world is closed to me, shut off by too many years spent away: Montu went away to America years ago and Nathu Choubey, I heard, went back to Banaras and started a hotel. When I walk past his paan-shop now and look at the crowds thronging through those neon-lit streets, the air-conditioned shops filled with rickety stalls and the tarpaulin counters of pavement vendors, at the traffic packed as tight as a mail train all the way to the Dhakuria overbridge, somehow, though the paan-shop hasn’t changed, I find myself doubting it. (7-8)

A shadow line hovers between imagination and reality. The interpersonal relationships are partly based on imagination and partly on reality, and when they are retold they are re-lived as well. The narrator’s silent love for Ila always makes him have a protective disposition towards her. Ila, according to the grandmother’s
thinking, is a greedy slut, living in America only for money and comforts. But the narrator’s love always shields her from all these accusations of the grandmother: “She has to live on pocket money; she doesn’t have the money to buy things like that…. She spends her spare time going on demonstrations and acting in radical plays for Indian immigrants in east London” (79).

In *The Shadow Lines*, the meaning of what happens is the central concern. People and events encountered in childhood are brought into focus when the adult narrator views them from a perspective of cumulative knowledge. This novel is also famous for its debate on partition. As Kushwant Singh observes: “It’s the best work on partition. It operates at many levels –memories, boundaries et al that one is totally soaked in his narrative.” The novel also discusses nationalism at length. We can say that Tha’mma’s nationalism is quite different from the dictionary meaning. *The Shadow Lines* undercuts nationalism by questioning history, the official version of history, on which the idea of a nation is constructed. However, as far as offering solutions to the problems of nationalism are concerned, the novel refuses to oblige. For an understanding of the novel’s stance vis-à-vis nationalism, one has to begin by analyzing Tha’mma’s concept of nationalism and what constitutes her nationalism. Hutchinson and Smith observe:

Nationalism was, first of all, a doctrine of popular freedom and sovereignty. The people must be liberated – that is, free from any external constraints; they must determine their own destiny and be masters in their own house; they must control their own sources; they must obey only their inner voice. But that entailed fraternity. The people must be united; they must dissolve all internal differences; they must be gathered together in a single historic territory, a homeland; and they must have legal equality and share a single public culture.
Tha’mma’s idea of nationalism comprises almost all the above-mentioned characteristics. She is exited at the idea of doing something: “Ever since she heard those stories, she had wanted to do something for the terrorists, work for them in a small way, steal a little bit of their glory for herself” (39). Tha’mma’s brand of nationalism is that which

…shunts other people out; which defines ‘Us’ against ‘Them.’ To call yourself Australian or Chilean or Sri Lankan is to draw a psychological as well as physical boundary around yourself, and those who claim the same national identity. The fact that we are inside that boundary, or border necessarily means that ‘they’ are outside it.  

For Tha’mma anyone not living in India is an “outsider” and hence should be suspected. It is this abstract entity of nationalism that inspires her to bring the old man to India: “Poor old man …. Imagine what it must be to die in another country, abandoned and alone in your old age” (135).

The views of Tha’mma are reminiscent of Earnest Renan’s idea of a nation propounded in his famous essay “Qu’est –cequ’une nation?” published in 1882. For Renan,

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Only two things, actually, constitutes this soul, this spiritual principle. One is the past, the other is the present. One is in the possession of a rich legacy of remembrances; the other is the actual consent, the desire to live together, the will to continue to value the heritage which all holds in common. A heroic past is the social principle on which the national idea rests. To have common glories in the past, a common will in the present; to have accomplished great things together; to wish to do so again, that is the essential for being a nation.  

By highlighting the fact that even after partition there might not be any difference between the two regions across the border, the novel questions the ideology
of nationalism. By stressing the identity rather than the differences across the border, the novel questions the primordial view of nationalism – the view that the grandmother holds. Paul R. Brass observes that from the primordial point of view Hindus and Muslims, due to the cultural differences, were destined to separate into two distinct nations. He states:

From the primordial point of view, which was also the view of Muslim separatism, Hindus and Muslims constituted in pre-modern times distinct civilizations destined to develop into separate nations once political mobilizations took place. The differences between the two cultures were so great that it was not conceivable that assimilation of the two could take place and that a single national culture could be created to which both would contribute. The contrary view is that the cultural and religious differences between Hindus and Muslims were not so great as to rule out the creation of either a composite national culture or at least a secular political union in which those aspects of group culture that could not be shared would be relegated to the private sphere. From this point this point of view, Muslim separation was not pre-ordained, but resulted from the conscious manipulation of selected symbols of Muslim identity by Muslim elite groups in economic and political competition with each other and with the elite among Hindus.\(^{14}\)

The narrative undercuts the view based on the difference between the created regions in the subcontinent by highlighting the similarities between Dhaka and Calcutta: after partition the two cities are seen as “an inverted image of each other” (223).

The narrative accomplishes the task of undercutting the ideology of nationalism by questioning the received/official version of history. The various characteristics of the primordial view of nationalism, as exemplified through Tha’mma, have a common basis or emerge from a common source, that of history. In
fact the whole idea of a nation-state revolves around history. The idea of nationalism nourishes on past glories:

Simon Bolivar in Colombia, Juan and Evitaperon in Argentina, Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi in India, are all used as icons on which to hang the emotions of current nationalisms. In former Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milosevic linked old stories about Croat atrocities with promises of Serbian greatness to fill the emotional and economic hole left by Tito’s death. The ultra-right nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky continually harks back to Russia’s for men greatness to harness current discontent.  

Some critics seem to be of the view that the ending of the novel is mawkish. This criticism seems to be unwarranted. This novel is enriched as a version of bildungsroman, and the ending adds to its rich texture. Thus, the ending leaves the reader with the sense that reality or history is but provisional. The Shadow Lines ends but does not conclude. It raises serious questions about our roots, our identities, and at the same time questions: Why war? Why riots? Why partition? Why borders? Why Shadow Lines? Here we may invoke the spirit of a very worldly philosopher, the great twentieth century economist John Maynard Keynes, who once raised a toast proclaiming economists to be “the guardians, not of civilization, but of the possibility of civilization.” This honour can also be handed over to Amitav Ghosh.
References


