CHAPTER III

AMITAV GHOSH’S THE SHADOW LINES

Introduction:

The Shadow Lines is a highly innovative, complex, and celebrated novel of Amitav Ghosh, published in 1988. It received the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award in the following year. Not only literary critics but some notable critical works have acclaimed it for what it has been able to achieve as a work of art. It focuses on historical facts, the post partition scenario of violence. Its overall form is a subtle interweaving of facts, fiction and reminiscence. The Shadow Lines is a significant work in South Asian literature in the last decade. It sums up and fictionalizes all the major issues of postcolonial literature – the search of identity, the need for independence and the difficult relationship with the colonial culture, the rewriting colonial past and attempt at creating a new language and a new narrative form and to understand the communal past.

In The Shadow Lines, Ghosh offers us not only a conjugation of the personal and the national but, he sets the personal conflict against the backdrop of national turmoil, but very often he deals with other peoples’ memories of times and places. The narrator has never known many of these but he speaks about them. Thus showing on the one hand that the lines dividing people and countries have always existed and on the other that these invisible borders, are and have always been ‘Shadowy’, and ‘illusory’. These borders are often born out of “different strands of nationalism and ideology”¹ which can be potential and often
disrupting sources of violence. There are innumerable borders which divide people from others and from themselves, borders separating the colonizer and the colonized in the past and ‘us’ from ‘them’ in the present. These borders keep changing continuously, as the perspective from which we look at them changes. Moreover, there are other invisible mental lines separating the past and the present, the memory and the reality, the identity and the mask, and last but not the least, there are critical and historiographical borders marking the territories of literature, the different genres, but also, less obviously, the demarcations separating central canon and peripheral productions of British writers and postcolonial authors.

It will not be unjust to say that *The Shadow Lines* is the main story of Tha'mma, who is an unnamed narrator and grandmother of the unnamed grandson, who is the narrator of the story. But the narrator is not an indifferent repository character like Sanjay of the Mahabharata. He meets all the characters and gives his own assessment of everyone and in the process; he reveals not only the misgivings of several of them about one another but also reveals his own mental make up.

*The Shadow Lines* is a repository of family stories told by the unnamed narrator. The novel is a story of narrator’s grandmother Tha'mma, Tridib, Ila, Robi and May. It is just like the narrator’s autobiography. Except May all other characters belong to one family from Dhaka and most of them came to Calcutta before partition. Since the family was divided, the narrator and his grandmother belong to one family and Tridib, Ila, Robi belong to another family. Tridib and Ila used to come to the Narrators’s house often. The narrator liked them and they played and wandered around Gole Park. The grandmother did not like Tridib. To her he was a spoiled boy and hence she used to ask the
narrator not to be in his company. But the narrator did not take it seriously. However, the old woman spoke well on their face, made omelet for them. Tridib’s father was an important officer in the U.N.O and he used to visit one nation after the other. Tridib and Ila also went with them and they had an opportunity to visit many nations and people. Thus, he went on describing a chain of events most of them are from London and Calcutta. There is no link or sequence between any two events. They are just the events of routine experience in the life of these characters which belong to middle class and the higher middle class families of the metropolitan environment. The narrator introduces an English family of Mr. Leonle Tresawsen who was in the civil services in India and he came in contact with Chandrasekhar Dutt Chaudhary, the grandfather of the narrator, who was a judge. Tresawsen had a daughter and a son Alan Tresawsen. The daughter was married to Mr. Price and hence she is introduced as Mrs. Price. She is a widow now and she has a daughter called May and a son Nick Price. They live now in England. The friendship of these two families continues and whenever any one of the Chaudhari family goes to England, he or she stays with the Price family. Thus the novel is the story of a Bengali family and that of an English family. The incidents are narrated either at the Narrator’s home or at Gole park where other boys used to assemble. Once Tridib described May, his acquaintance and the boys in the group asked whether she was sexy. For Tridib, May is a foreigner woman and narrator describes her as a figure of romance. When they are sixteen, Ila and the narrator are embarrassed by their memories of sitting, as children, on a park bench of the lake counting birds. They play game of house husband and wife in the Magda as a fantasy.
Along with the Narrator, Ila becomes a central figure in the novel. For the Grandmother, she is a free school street whore, unlike the Bengali metropolitan woman. The old woman cherishes a misunderstanding about the culture of England and hence she does not like Ila to be in England. Yet, Ila and Robi had once been to the Grand hotel in Calcutta. There was a cabaret. The three drank beer: Ila smoked with him, however, dancing in a hotel in India was supposed to be immoral. But Ila nourished no such notions. She asked a stranger to dance with her. Robi who was strong and aggressive opposed her. But her rebellious attitude made it an issue of challenge. She actually began to dance with the stranger and Robi beat the man. The narrator intervened and they all came out. Here, The author displays a conflict between two cultures. Ila, mostly had been outside India and she thinks that the Indian moral codes are narrow. The narrator and Robi were students in Delhi, and it was suspected about them that they were visiting whores.

Mrs. Price had married her teacher Mr. Price, but he died soon. She and May performed orchestra programmes for a living. May, now being young lived independently. In addition to her musical performances, she was working for Amnesty and Oxfum and other relief agencies. The narrator also had been to London many times. He attended May’s musical programmes, dined together and stayed with her. She kept many books: most of them were Russian. The narrator gives this account of the Price family to the companions of Gole Park Adda. The incidents relating to Ila’s father’s movement from one nation to another and to Calcutta, now and then are narrated. The family used to come to Calcutta from Indonesia. Soon Ila came to the narrator’s house. They both went to the lake where they used to sit on a bench.
remembering and reflecting on childhood days and other things which
the narrator could remember. Tridib had showed him the Bartholomew
Atlas with Plaza Mayor in Madrid or Cuzco. The Narrator says he wants
to go to Egypt to see the Ibn Tulan Mosque and the great pyramid of
Cheops. Once Ila had brought the Year Book of the International
schools and showed her photograph in jeans standing with her friends
Teresa, Cassano, Mercedes etc., her friends were most beautiful and
talented. It shows that she did not mix up with poor girls or boys. She
had a boyfriend Jamshed, a fencing champion. When she was ten, she
was in Colombia and she described her house there. It was a prestigious
locality where diplomats and big officers lived in bungalows with big
lawns and gulmoher trees. While staying there once a lizard like animal
entered Ila’s house. Ram Dayal, the cook cried with fear calling it to be
a crocodile and Ila’s mother asked Lizie, the Aayah to kill it. Ila’s
mother is called with a nick name ‘Queen Victoria’. Ila’s friend, doll
like Magda, is described at length. She is the type which, alone, Ila likes.
The narrator comes to know that Ila likes and plays with Nick Price (the
son of Mrs. Price) as much as she likes him. She comes to know that the
narrator does not like it and she calls him jealous. Thus, Ila becomes the
focus of desire and mystery for the narrator.

The Shadow Lines is written on an emotional plane, underlining
and explaining the small, universal truths of life. Fascinatingly true
depiction of the mental condition of children is remarkable. Amitav
Ghosh, it seems, has relived his childhood in The Shadow Lines. The
narrator stands out as an adult rooted in his childhood experiences.
Whenever he experiences life, his reaction to it stems out of his
childhood impressions. How does he take cities like London, Calcutta or
Dhaka or people like his cousin Ila, or acquaintances like May and Nick

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— everything springs from his childhood perceptions. It seems so natural. It seems the only honest way of taking life and its experiences. So, if it may take the conventional critical term memories of childhood is a major theme of *The Shadow Lines*. The treatment of the subject is simply overwhelming – Tridib is the Narrators older cousin. His impact on the narrator as a child has a special bond. They have, in a way, conspired to look at the world with their own eyes rather Tridib’s eccentric, rational, detached eyes. When Tridib tells the narrator about his childhood at London, the child narrator tries to imagine Tridib as a small boy and finally narrator says.

*I had decided he had looked like me.*

So while listening stories of London, Cairo, and other exotic places, the narrator travels, identifying himself completely with the bigger, (almost perfect to his child eyes) role model. The narrator’s identification with his hero i.e. Tridib is so intense that when asked for a response, the narrator says.

*I was nervous now: I could see that Tridib was waiting to hear what I’d have to say and I didn’t want to disappoint him.*

In the area where the narrator lives, Gariahat and Gole Park in Calcutta, Tridib is very well known on the streets. All pan shop owners, sweet shop owners, boys on the street know Tridib because the place is his favorite ‘adda’ or ‘hount’ (in English). The narrator is enveloped in the protective presence of Tridib so, narrator feels that.

*I was grateful for the small privileges his presence secured for me on those streets. For the odd sweet given to me by a shopkeeper of his acquaintance; for being rescued from a fight in the park by some young fellow who knew him.*
The narrator has a pure child like love for Tridib. As a child he burst with pride at Tridib’s show of intellect and superior knowledge on those roadside haunts. The narrator’s sense of pride expands when Tridib treats him like an equal, an adult, and shares secrets with him. He fiercely defends Tridib when people ridicule him on his back for all his made up or real wonder stories. The child in the narrator is so dominant that when years later May, Tridib’s beloved, spots him in London in the crowd after her performance in an orchestra he feels “suddenly she smiled, rose on tiptoe, pulled my head down and kissed me on my cheeks.” He is an adult here, treated as a child.

Amitav Ghosh *The Shadow Lines* is the Great fiction patterns itself on psychological truths. Some great novelist really smuggle the psychological percepts directly from text psychology. For example, castration fear in male children is a major childhood theme in psychoanalytical literature. Tridib deals with this while telling a story to the narrator and his younger brother 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.” Ghosh successfully demonstrates the accumulation of complexes in childhood and growing years. A rich and influential relative in the form of Mayadebi, Shaheb and Ila come to the middle class household of the narrator. To add to it, they come from different parts of the world with strange tales. The complex is so deep rooted in the narrator that he cannot think of these big relatives as blood relation. Narrator says
I would not bring myself to believe that their worth in my eyes could be reduced to something as arbitrary and unimportant as a blood relationship.

This can be taken as clue to the narrator’s unsuccessful relationship with Ila. He reduces himself so much in his own eyes that Ila never actually notices him except after she has permanently damaged herself by marrying Nick. The narrator loves Ila but he cannot say so. He looks at her in awe and admiration. The inequality of their needs arises out of his sense of small worth. She introduces him to Nick as a child and immediately he heaps on himself another feather in his complex cap. It is almost painful to see him as a child falling a prey to inferiority complex. Ila says “He is very big. Much bigger than you: much stronger too. He’s twelve, three years older than us.” After these words of Ila, life never remains the same for the narrator, and Narrator feels

after that day Nick Price, whom I had never seen 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 soin Ila’s eyes and therefore true.

The Narrator’s fascination for Ila is well known to everyone in the family. As a child he gulps humiliation when his mother exposes his obsession with Ila’s expected visit to India. The child is exposed as being vulnerable before Ila’s charms. Ila comes to know early in life that the narrator needs her, but she does not need him. It is an unequal relationship right from the beginning and its origin very much lies in the narrator’s middle class background.

Not to that these descriptions of childhood only are fraught with pain. In fact, some pain is part of every stage of life. Ila’s pain is that
Nick ignores her. No one’s situation is perfect and that is life. Some pages beautifully fill us with childhood joys. Narrator say’s “I pushed her (Ila), urging her on, my belly churning with a breathless hide and seek excitement.”  

Another subtle aspect of childhood is specific world of the girl child. It is lovely girls and their external longing for beauty and home are delicately posturized. Girls equate beauty with desirability and acceptance. Ila tells her own sad experience at school in London where Nick does not come to help her. She narrates it through her doll’s name, Magda. Ila and the Narrator are playing house – house and Magda is their child. Magda, their little kid, has gone to school and everyone is struck by Magda’s beauty. Ila actually narrating....

You couldn’t blame them for staring they’d never seen anyone as beautiful as Magda. And she liked her too: they all wanted to be friends with her girls, boys, and teachers, all of them. 

It is the eternal feminine, that beauty gets you everything, just everything. This game also tells about the urge of children to grow up, be adults, play Mamma and Pappa and for once be in controlling, guiding position.

When the narrator comes to know about Tridib’s death, he gets a shock because Tridib was his friend, philosopher and guide. His influence on the narrator as a child was absolutely clear. However, when he learns of his death, he express his feeling thus 

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. 

The mention of Tridib’s death brings us to sympathy for him. He is such a unique character. He is a good student. He is all these and

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much more. But above everything else he is the man who gave the narrator the keen ability to perceive things, to go for minute and relevant details, to build his own world, to see places and not just visit them to ‘know’ people and not just meet them. Tridib has a special kind of presence. He has the capacity to attract people. The narrators grandmother, Tha'mma is almost scared of Tridib’s influencing quality, '(.....) my grandmother would not let him stay long. She believed him to be capable of exerting his influence at a distance, like a baneful planet.'

As the narrator realizes he comes to these roadside haunts just to distract himself after exhaustive studies. Tridib's peculiarity is his unpredictability. He is a bundle of contradictions. In any case Tha'mma plans to keep the narrator out of Tridib’s home.

Tridib tells him all the stories, his stay in England and the experiences in installments. The narrator receives every bit of Tridib’s influence happily. He literally shapes the narrator vision.

The whole process of training the narrator is deliberate on Tridib’s part and spontaneous on the narrator's part. So the Narrator says:

...among other things Tridib was an archaeologist, he was not interested in fairy lands: the things he (Tridib) wanted to teach me (Narrator), he used to say, was to use my imagination with precision.\textsuperscript{14}

His impact is so substantial that when the narrator visits England he feels captive to Tridib’s perceptions.

Tridib’s relationship with May is essentially tragic. They are attached to each other. He writes a highly provocative letter to her. But
May is hooked by this man who could write pornographic letter to her. She comes to India and finds that Tridib is not a monster after all. She finds him lovable. When she first spots him at the railway station, May says:

*He looked awkward, absurdly young, and somehow very reassuring. Also a little funny, because his eyes were hugely magnified by those glasses of his and he kept blinking in an anxious embarrassed kind of way. She hadn’t been able help throwing her arms around him; it was just pure relief. She knew at last why she had come and she was glad. It had nothing to do with curiosity.*

She had come for her love of Tridib.

But May is a girl with an extra edge. Her sense of justice, right and wrong is developed. In a very simple explanation of Tridib’s death, Mays desires to save the weak worked as catalyst on Tridib’s mind when he got out of the Mercedes in Dhaka among rioters to save the old, invalid Jethamoshi. While driving in a car they come across a dog the dog is injured. May forces Tridib to stop the car and see the dog. They notice that the dog is still alive. Then May takes out a penknife from her Purse along with a handkerchief tying the handkerchief on her hand, she held the mouth of the dog and slits with her penknife. Thus, they gave the relief to the dog from the pain. This incident indicates the nature of violence in the novel and is comparable to the murder of Tridib at the end of the novel. Tridib tells her that she did the right thing and that she need not be apologetic about the inconvenience she caused. Once in Dhaka among frenzied rioters. May once again cries in horror that they are acting selfishly, saving themselves while endangering Jathamoshai and he is cut ear to ear by Muslim rioters. His end is brutal. May, as she tells the narrator years later, does not realize that she a white ‘mem’ was safe but Tridib was their enemy, a Hindu from India. But interpretation

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cannot stop at material level only. As his name suggests, Tridib is trinity. In an act to save others, he dies. Therefore, he is Jesus Tridib is a sacrifice of human race at the altar of illogical hatred. Tridib is definitely a prophetic figure. After the incident of the stray dog in Calcutta, "He raised his chin and ran his forefinger down his neck like a barber stropping a razor. Promise me, he said, that you’ll do it for me too, if I should ever need it."^{16}

May on her part, is on a penance ever since Tridib’s death. She sleeps on floor. She fasts; she works for earthquake relief and things that, she collects money from streets with all her banners, and posters for social welfare. May lived as a true disciple of Christ, suffer his death like hell. She is literally on a self-torturing spree. It is only at the very end of the novel, she realizes the meaning of sacrifice. She frees herself of her burden of guilt and she says:

_But I know now, I didn't kill him', I couldn't have, if i'd wanted. They gave himself up; it was sacrifice. I know, I can't understand it, I know I mustn't try, for any real sacrifice is a mystery._^{17}

If May is acutely conscious of her duties and faults, Ila is just the opposite, self-absorbed, oblivious of others needs and irresistibly charming. Ila's portrait is a typical drawing of a modern, beautiful, attractive, foolish girl. She is stubborn. She lives in her own world. She has no sense of commitment as such. Due to lack of depth, She lacks identity. Ila is fluid, flowing and taking different shapes. The narrator comes with a very telling remark on the photos Ila shows him in their childhood, the narrator says,

_But somehow, though Ila could tell me everything about those parties and dances, what she said and what she did and what_
she wore, she herself was always unaccountable absent in the pictures.18

The core of Ila’s existence in *The Shadow Lines* is her spell over the narrator. And it is not for nothing. When she comes to meet the narrator at the Trafalgor square, she looked up at the Church, spotted him and smiled. A couple of tourists were standing beside, they gasped. “She was so improbably, absurdly beautiful, I began to laugh.”19 She turns the narrator crazy. He is helpless before her. It is a repeated pattern in *The Shadow Lines*. The narrator is again and again defeated by her. He knows his weakness and can’t do anything about it. Ila, on her part, is enthralled by Nick. Nick is white. He is strong and big. So in a sense we can say that Ila’s condition in relation to Nick is the same as the narrator’s in relation to her. This careless, self-willed, pampered, beautiful girl has actually taken the narrator’s life hostage. At one point, when her hurting, ignoring goes beyond limits, the narrator felt the tears running down his cheeks. After consoling him a bit, she again goes to Nick and when she does not come back the narrator know she has taken the narrators life hostage yet again: The Narrator knew that a part of narrator life as a human being had ceased: that the narrator no longer existed, but as a chronicle.

Ila is bent upon carrying herself – damaging attraction for undeserving Nick. He is her weakness she wants him, and fantasizes about him. Finally, she succeeds in getting married to him but she pays for it very heavy indeed. She acts blindly. She cannot see that she is clearly being exploited. Right from the beginning Nick has plans to start a business where Ila’s father purchases a flat for their honeymoon and after formal registration of marriage in London, go to Calcutta for the weddings. But all this fairytale stuff soon ends in Ila’s swollen eyes over

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Nick sleeping with another woman. And poison has already entered their marriage as it normally does into many marriages. Ila’s marriage can be taken as a comment on the institution of marriage as such. So much hatred breeds within this pious, religious and social bond. It is almost hell to be continuously on war with one's own mate, to continuously humiliate and be humiliated in turn. Ila is all hatred for her husband after the revelation about his promiscuity.

Irrity of fate works in matter of love. Love is a major source of pain in this novel. The state of being in love; the actual mental state of love is a very elusive subject. Love as it is depicted in popular movies, TV serials, and fiction is not convincing. It is a stereotype that is being repeated thousand times over. Love is an overplayed and yet not at all understood emotion. To begin with, love is an emotion that centres around one single individual. Now that individual can be anyone – matter, father, beloved and brother just anyone. So the very first popular belief that love is only for a suitable mating partner of the opposite sex is wrong. The emotions as such are very wide in its scope. Secondly, love denotes suspension of logic. Love and logic are natural enemies. It also implies that love and every type of rationality i.e. justice, equality etc. are ontological. Thirdly, by being irrational love implies an uncertain, excited and confused state of mind. When one individual becomes secondary, sensibly prioritizing in life’s agenda is not possible. There is lack of control over emotional life if we go by the above short description of the emotion of love, we can safely state that the narrator is in love with Tridib, Tha’mma and above everyone with Ila, his silly, beautiful cousin, and it may be suggested here that with none of them he gets his due, just reciprocity. Tridib reciprocates his unconditional hero worship but only to an extent. Soon May comes and takes the all
important eloquence and centrality in his life. The narrator is left high and dry. Narrator says:

*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.*

Tha'mma is another pillar of this novel. In her, Ghosh depicts all the peculiarities of a suffering, braving middle class Indian. For all her extremes, she is a real life heroine. She is made of that substance that goes in producing strong, disciplined children and coherent family. Tha'mma becomes a widow at the age of thirty – two. She joined a school to support her family. She has given her life to her school. She retires from the school as its headmistress. She is sincere, devoted, hardworking, disciplined, all that a teacher is expected to be. She is truly a no-nonsense woman. She cannot see anyone ideal in her home. She tells the narrator, her grandson that if anyone wastes time, it starts stinking. She has a militant’s attitude to life. She is always on the defensive. There is a very touching incident where Tha’mma does not want any favour even from her own sister, Mayadebi. Mayadebi offers to take them to a place in her car. But Tha’mma does not agree readily to it. The narrator senses ‘the fears she had accumulated in the long years after my grandfather’s premature death, when she 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 the wealth of pride it had earned her and intuitively that all that had kept her from agreeing at once was her fear of accepting anyone that she could not return in exact measure.*

This is typical middle class mindset. The upper class is used to receiving favours. The lower class cannot refuse them because it needs them badly. It is only the upright middle class that
tries to balance the scales. Tha’mma’s whole worldview is centered on defending herself and her family against a hostile world.

So, this is the worldly lesson Tha’mma got from her experiences in life that one has to attack the world before it attacks one. Her defensive posture takes a more rigid form. There are many such ideas that the author suggests. Through trans-border situation Ghosh at times comes with remarkable and relevant ideas regarding civilization, growth and international frontiers. As the title, The Shadow Lines, suggests, all lines are shadowy lines; they are not real. Ghosh questions the very basis of modern nation states. It does not matter how many states exist in a continent or sub continent. It does not change the well begin of its people. Nationhood itself is a mirage because it is not based on any logic. When nature draws line in the form of mountains, oceans, rivers, it is real. But man-made borders are shallow and unjustifiable. Jethamoshai speaks well when Tha’mma and others persuade him to go to India, and Tha’mma says.

*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 – Shidia. It’s all very well, you’re going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? And what will you do then? Where will you move? No one will have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I’ll die here.*

In fact, being rooted at a place is a constant thought with Ghosh. Ila’s sad experience at school, when she is not taken care of, by Nick-she only blames, May and others for living in an alien land. Tha’mma believes that those who go and settle abroad do so for money, just for money, nothing else. But with people like Ila, it is perhaps different. Ila wants to live life on the edge. She wants to live dangerously, doing things unconventionally. She tells the narrator that she wants to be part

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of great events. In her eyes the small events of a backward country like India have no relevance whatsoever. The deathlessness for the present culture is something the author cannot ignore. When the narrator, Ila and Robi go to a nightclub in Calcutta, Ila exerts her freedom. She goes to two businessmen and starts flirting with them. Robi is a physically strong boy. He simply throws away one of the two businessmen. The singing and dancing stops and the trio move out. Ila is 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 for your bloody culture and free of all of you.”

So, this is what modern civilization is all about. To be free for commitments of relationships, of duties, of everything, live for one’s own self that seems to be the motto. Certainly, crazy, mad, free generations do not wish to taste the joy of surrender, unconventional love and acceptance.

Communal hatred and the mechanics of riots is another important dimension of The Shadow Lines. Panic, humor fear and hatred are universal components of riots. Riots are the same everywhere. There is a very moving account of riots in Calcutta. Riots as they come to children. Children, narrator as one of them, are struck with fear. He climbs on his school bus and everyone stares at his water bottle. Then he comes to know that everyone is advised to drink soda as water supply itself has been poisoned. Strange loud noises are coming to their classroom when Mrs. Anderson is teaching them. They are deported back to their houses amidst a drama of terror and violence. Experiencing the riot, the narrator says ‘The streets had turned themselves inside out: our city had turned against us.”

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We can compare this to Robi's mental state that resulted from watching the murder of his own brother, Tridib by Frenzied rioters. He is unable to free himself from memories of that terrible event. It comes to him in ghastly forms in his dream.

**Narrative Technique in The Shadow Lines:**

Amitav Ghosh *The Shadow Lines* is the story of an unnamed and un-described narrator whose intimate experiences with some of the family members and friends leave strong imprints on his mind. However, an objection can be raised to this simple conclusion as the narrator talking about himself rather than talks about his grandmother and Ila and Tridib. Moreover, when he speaks about Tridib, Tridib might be speaking about his experience in London with Alan, Mike, Dan and Francesca in 1939 or while the narrator remembers grandmother- she might be lost in the old days of the freedom struggle. The complexity of the novels narrative technique lies therein. Discarding a linear structure and the conventional narrative scheme, Amitav Ghosh employs a circular, loop–like structure and a multiple narrative scheme in the novel.

The majority of Ghosh’s writing focuses on exploring geographical and social boundaries. In *The Shadow Lines* Ghosh juxtaposes the lives of two different yet intertwined families – one Indian and one English – to question the boundaries between their cultural and Geographical settings. The title alludes to the blurring of lines between nations and families as well as the blurred lines within one's own self identity. Ghosh depicts the characters for the novel as caught between two worlds, and the struggle to come to terms with both their present lives as well as their past, forms the core for the narrative.
In *The Shadow Lines* Ghosh gives a new twist to an old theme of partition. The lines symbolically represent all such lines that divide nations and people in the name of nationalism, religion, language, and caste. What is new in the novel is that the novelist denies the very existence of these lines and hence calls them ‘Shadowy or illusory’. This begins the debate as to whether the novel is about ‘the meaning of political freedom in the modern world’ or an escape from the reality. However, the ground reality is that there exist dividing lines as the narrator’s father tries to explain to his mother the boundary between India and Bangladesh. But external reality is that there is no dividing line as such. Artificial lines have been created by men between countries and peoples and have been dismantled by them as per their convenience. So we encounter two realities running parallel in the novel.

In this 'memory novel' memory plays a crucial role. Memory generates action of the novel and determines the form of the novel- its partial answers, its digressions, its resolutions, and its looping, nonlinear and wide ranging narrative technique. The narrator lives a truer life in his memories and we meet other characters in the narrator’s memories. To make it complex, Ghosh sometimes employs a memory within memory kind of framework and sometimes projects many memories mixing together. Sparsely related and long silenced memories come to the narrator in bits and pieces. Ghosh arranges the novel in such a way that all the important incidents are preceded by a prelude as if to provide a catalyst for the narrator’s memories. For example, the narrator recalls that when he was a child, his grandmother had received Mayadebi’s letter announcing May’s proposed visit to India and that Tridib asked him whether he would come with Tridib to receive May. This is followed by the narrator’s memory after many years. He says: “The first
time May and I talked about her visit to Calcutta was on the day after Ila’s wedding ....” 26 But before he actually talks with May about her visit to India, he describes in detail Ila’s wedding. He is getting drunk and accompanying May to her house, his imposing himself upon her sexually, then how after getting up in the morning, he remembered his act of seduction the previous night and his feeling of embarrassment, his joining May in her work of collection of money for the African famine, and then follows their conversation of the time when the narrator had gone with his elders to receive May at Howrah station... Here rather than taking this shape of chronological documentation the events as recollections of the past spontaneously resurface to occupy the narrators mind and make him see minute things with telescopic eyes. Between the receipt of Mayadebi’s letter about May’s visit and the narrator and Tridib’s plan to go to receive May and their actual implementation of it, there are a wide range of incidents. These interludes perform a major function of throwing light on May’s loneliness, the narrator’s sadness after Ila’s wedding and most importantly prepare us for the final union of May and the narrator. This narrative technique is maintained throughout the novel. Ghosh’s novel reveals truth as a shock to the readers. He keeps his readers prepared for the forthcoming conflicts and crises and yet tactfully always holds back the suspense. This is most apparent in the delineation of the riots of 1964 and Tridib’s death.

It commences with the narrator’s comment.

It actually took me fifteen years to discover that there was a connection between my nightmare bus ride back from school and the events that befell Tridib and the others in Dhaka.27

Ghosh uses a unique narrative device as he doesn’t directly make the narrator recollect what he wants him to, but also leads us to a
gradual disclosing of things. And he makes him recall his personal experience through various public happenings or discussion. Again he practices the method of interweaving prelude and interlude with the one continuous memory. History and mythology interpenetrate the novel. The narrator who is working on his Ph.D. at New Delhi in 1979 listens to a lecture by an Australian speaker on India’s war with China in 1962 which leads the narrator and his friends to a discussion about the war. While discussing the war, the narrator vividly remembers how he and his mother had come to know about it and what the scenario was during the war. Feeling that something more important than the war had occurred in his childhood, he thinks of the riots of 1964, for which he has to count years on his fingers. Similarly he reminisces about the precise time of the riots as he links it with the fact that it was the same day that Budhi Kunderan had made his maiden Test Century.

Simultaneously the writer alludes to Tridib’s death constantly reminding us of some connection between the riots and Tridib’s death and preparing us for the ghastly truth without giving away the suspense. Tridib’s death is the central act in the novel and Ghosh employs his narrative skill to portray the tragedy of this act. The narrator says: “And so, fifteen years after his death, Tridib watched over me, as I tried to learn the meaning of distance.”

Then, the narrator, who talks about the family joke, concerning grandma’s love for jewelry. But what seems to be interruption is not actually so, since it is from the seeds of such interludes that memory sprouts or is watered by some useful hints. Wrapped in different moods and different time, these interludes are woven quite skillfully with the thread of one continuous recollection so that it does not hamper the flow of the novel. Moreover, it brings to close a lyric from the description of

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grandma's love of jewelry for the sake of war. Observing his grandmother in a lunatic like state, the highly disturbed narrator hears his mother saying about his grandmother as he is on the verge of fainting: “She’s never been the same, since they killed Tridib over there.” Later on when the narrator is at peace with himself, he relives the moment his father told him that Tridib had died in an accident in Dhaka. Finally, it comes directly to two accounts from the witness who had seen Tridib dying in front of their eyes- Robi’s account and May’s confession. Ghosh is aware of the different equations that Robi and May shared with Tridib and he accordingly shapes up their accounts. May starts exactly where Robi left. In Robi’s account, the graphic description of violence is dominating.

Ghosh understands the tendency of memory well and uses it artistically to give his novel variety and force. At times memory becomes vague or blurred and one has to strive to recall the exact time happenings as the narrator in order to pinpoint the riots of 1964, has to count years on his fingers and has to think of the connection of Budhi Kunderan’s maiden Test Century, and only then memory strikes with immediacy and powerfulness. At the same time, memory has the contrary tendency of remaining exact in terms of time, places and other minute matters. Observing this tendency closely, the writer makes the narrator think of events referring to precise time. The first line of the novel itself brings home this trait as it says, ‘in 1939, thirteen years before I was born,’ and the narrator goes on to give such precise information about time like Tridib and May had begun their correspondence when he was twenty seven and she nineteen in 1959, the narrator turned ten in 1962, in the same year his father got promoted and his grandmother retired from the school where she had taught since
1936, and then comes a date by date account – 2nd January, 1964 when they received Mayadevi’s letter, a day after grandma and other left for Dhaka, 11th January 1964 is the date of the paper telling about 10th January 1964’s riots in Calcutta and the narrator remembers all this in 1979. Not only in time but such preciseness can even also be found in places. The narrator’s flat is at Gole Park and later on the narrator shifts to southern Avenue, opposite the lake. Tridib lived in their family house at Ballygunge, the house of the Prices is 44 Lymington road and the tube station is West Hampstead, Ila stays at stock well, Mayadebi and her husband stay in Dhaka at Dhanmundi, the new building of grandmother’s school is near Deshprya park, Montu and his family had moved to Gole Park from Park circus, the bombed out road where Nan and his friends lived is silent Road, the pub where Ila, Robi and the narrator gather is the Kemble’s Head, on Long Acre, at a short walk from Convent Garden, the place where Nick and Ila were waiting for the narrator and Robi is in the corner where Sumatra road joined West End Lane. Besides this, there is also graphic detailed information about photographs, interiors of houses, newspapers, advertisements, maps etc. By using this device of describing exact times, places and things, Ghosh links the narratives and authenticates the nexus between the historical movement and the fictive world. Moreover, it also allows the reader to examine the text with diverse contexts and validate the author’s perception of the time and milieu covered by the novel.

Backward and forward journey in time is a recurrent device used by the writer in the novel. This structural device is in harmony with the novel being an extended memory. Besides that, it also presents a central theme that the line dividing past and present is only a shadow, that the past lives in the present and that the present is shaped by the past.

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In *The Shadow Lines*, most of the episodes in the novel do not happen, but are narrated. Number of stories are told to the narrator like grandma’s story about the house in Dhaka, her story about a bearded revolutionary who was arrested in her class, Robi’s and May’s accounts of Tridib's death, Ila's make-believe story about Magda, May's telling the narrator the real story behind Ila’s fantasy, Tridib’s story of his childhood experience of witnessing a coupling of casual strangers in ruin in a letter to May, May telling about Tridib and her relationship with him to the narrator and the story of woman across-the-seas which is never finished.

*The Shadow Lines* being a bildungsroman, it is natural that the novel is written in a first person narrative, but as Ghosh fuses family chronicle, political and social document with the main autobiography it becomes imperative to have a more complex narrative device. Hence, the first person narrative is used from a dual viewpoint – that of the child and the adult “I”, this technique enables the writer to coalesce past and present together. It is similar to Toni Morison’s *The Bluest Eye* wherein she has used the perspective of Claudia as a little girl and Claudia as an adult. The narrative voice, now that of child’s and the adult’s voice criss-crosses the novel. The adult narrator makes comments with depth and understanding on the child narrator’s naive observations. This multiple narrative scheme gains one more level as the narrator’s consciousness meditates and frames other voices, stories and experiences. One of the best illustrations of this technique is the child narrator’s and May’s encounter with ‘cotton man’ whose tool seems to May a harp. The narrator in order to conceal his ignorance consents to the request and tells the cotton man to play it and later on May pays five
rupees to him. This episode is reported by the narrator to Ila years later and Ila’s comment is characteristic of her nature:

Sounds exactly like her (May) she has a kind of wide eyed air about her even when she’s in London like one of those worthy women who come down from small towns on weekend return tickets.  

Disagreeing this view, the grown-up narrator comes to a conclusion which originates from his mature understanding:

To me it seemed that May’s curiosity had grown out of a kind innocence, an innocence which set her apart from all the women I knew, for it was not the innocence of ignorance, but a forthright, unworldly kind of innocence, which I had never before met in a woman, for among the woman I knew, like my mother and my relatives, there were none, no matter how secluded, which comes from dealing with large families – a trait which seemed to grow in those women in direct proportion to the degree to which they were secluded from the world.  

In this episode three voices, that of the child narrator’s adult narrator’s and Ila’s, creep in. Ghosh uses this multiple narrative technique with great tact and power. The child narrator never comes to know things that the adult is supposed to know, while on the other hand the grown up narrator possesses the ability to analyze the complexities of human life and relationships with the help of his childhood memories and newly acclaimed knowledge and sensitivity. During their visit to Victoria memorial, as the child narrator sees May getting highly depressed and telling Tridib “It shouldn’t be here….. it’s an act of violence,” he is not able to decipher the meaning of Tridib’s explanatory words to May “This is our ruin”. They kindly watch his curiosity and haunt him but an understanding of those words come seventeen years later, when bits of information fall into place to create a pattern of meaning: “I would wonder about those words they would ring

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in my head, and I would try to take them apart, see what they meant, always without success, until that afternoon in that sandwich bar when she looked into the mirror and told me about his letter, the letter about ruins.  

A childhood memory comes back to the narrator to explain to him some important truth. He recalls an incident when Ila had visited them and his mother revealed that he had been waiting for her for days. To which Ila’s reaction was a tiny shrug and the narrator voices his feelings about this: “At that moment, I hated my mother…she had given me away, she had made public then and forever, the inequality of our needs.” Later on when the adult narrator approaches Ila stay in Mrs. Price’s cellar, the love sick narrator approaches Ila who is wrapped in one towel but as Ila goes upstairs to see Nick, the memory of his childhood returns to him: “I saw Ila again and again as she was when she stepped out of that car at Gole Park eighteen years ago: on that morning when she wrenched me into adulthood by demonstrating for the first time and forever, the inequality of our needs.”

The adult narrator who was a party to the happening in his childhood is able to pass remarks about peoples more objectively as can be seen in his comment can his father that his father was ‘a boyish sort man is some ways.” An obvious rift arises between the child narrator and the grown up narrator as the adult narrator looks back with sadness. Thus, the device of the multiple narrative schemes has been exercised to obtain different moods through different ways by the writer. The use of first person narrator brings in the feelings of poignancy and intimacy. The voice of the novelist sometimes may become prejudiced and can influence opinions of the readers. However, Ghosh grows beyond this

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flow as the transparency of his narrator allows other people to enter in his story and sometimes even interrogate his telling of the story.

Though Ghosh resembles other postmodernist writers in using the multiple narrative schemes, the story telling method and back and forth journey in time, his ease and brilliance in employing these devices makes his novel outstanding. The complex narrative technique is not there just for the sake of being but it very well matches with the mood and temperament of the characters and it adds to the beauty of the novel. The narrative technique in Ghosh’s hand becomes a tool of a poet and so everything merges into a whole. A very clichéd family chronicle and political autobiography are transformed into an interesting novel. The novel proves the point that Ghosh cannot be easily excelled in respect of the narrative technique.

**Imagination and Reality:-**

Amitav Ghosh’s “*The Shadow Lines*” resists classification. It is 'basically a memory novel'\(^\text{37}\) that views together past and present, childhood and adulthood, India and Bangladesh and Britain, Hindu and Muslim, story and happening, through the ‘Coil within Coil of memories unfurl within it’\(^\text{38}\), it establishes its sociality and such as such can be regarded both as a social document and a political novel.\(^\text{39}\) it is also in many ways a bildungsroman, tracing the growth and development of the narrator from childhood to maturity. It is part of the Indian experiment with the non fiction novel whose first significant landmark was Salman Rushdie’s *Midnights children*, it is a postmodernist work of fiction as Farrukh Dhondy’s *Bombay Duck*.
Several labels can be affixed to *The Shadow Lines*, each as valid as the others; after all, as Henry James noted in *The Art of the Novel*, 'The novel remains still, under the right persuasion, the most independent, most elastic, most prodigious of literary forms' But one of the most rewarding ways reading the novel is, that of looking at it as belonging to that long tradition of fiction that includes ‘*Don Quixote*’ and ‘*Tristram Shandy*’ on the one hand ‘*Travels with My Aunt*’ and ‘*Harown*’ And 'The Sea Of Stories' on the other: fiction, that is, that examines its symbiotic relationship with fact and explores the role of the imagination in creating and evoking reality, which ‘in the words of A. A. Mendilow, is always something created, it does not exist a priori.

This theme is established in *The Shadow Lines* through the use of the geographical metaphor and the journey motif implicit in its title-derived, significantly, from Conrad and in the titles of its two parts, ‘Going Away’ and ‘Coming Home’. This metaphor pervades the book and enables it to extend and to expand spatially and temporally. This is of course a traditional method for the novel that sets out to discover the relationship between imagination and reality; indeed, even Edward Said uses it when he observes the novel, 'stories at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world.' It is through its imagination, perception and rendering of human experience in everyday life, through what Proust calls the 'gross dimensions of social phenomena', ‘that the novel is able to ‘evoke the essentially non-finite quality of existence’ Ghosh’s approach has in fact a close affinity with Graham Greene’s in ‘*Travels with My Aunt*’ and ‘*The Captain and the Enemy*’, which are similarly based on the Metaphor of the journey.

 Appropriately, *The Shadow lines* begins with a statement about a journey, one that Mayadebi, the narrator’s great aunt, her husband and

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Tridib, her son, undertook in 1939, from India to England a journey which will be undertaken again and again, and by other characters in the novel too, both physical and in the imagination, sometimes, however, from England to India as well. Tridib’s father is a diplomat living abroad or in Delhi and only occasionally visiting Calcutta; but Tridib himself prefers to stay on in their family house in an upper middle class neighborhood of Calcutta with his elderly grandmother. Why he has rejected his parent’s peripatetic lifestyle is not known, but the narrator’s grandmother puts it down to incompatibility with his father. The fiercely bourgeois old lady disapproves not of her nephew’s estrangement from his father but of what she considers his flippancy in letting so trivial a matter stand in the way of his material prospects. In her eyes Tridib is an untrustworthy and dangerous non conformist, though outwardly he may seem the quintessential middle class Bengali, living steadily in Calcutta and looking after his grandmother, and engaged in research for his doctoral degree. The apparently every day quality of his life, paradoxically, only emphasizes his uniqueness, and he is a source of perennial fascination for the boy who as a young adult is the narrator of the ‘story’ of the novel.

Tridib, too, is a story teller, ‘happiest in neutral, impersonal places – coffee houses, bars, street-corner ‘addas’ the sort of place where people come, talk and go away without expecting to know each other and further, for it is detachment and objectivity that allow the imagination to soar. He spends much of his time in gossip with young never-do-well at street corner and tea-stalls, much to the distaste of the grandmother, who has a Grad grind – like belief about time: For her time was like a toothbrush it went moldy if it wasn’t used; and stank. Tridib, however, ‘never seemed to use his time, but his time didn’t
stink.\textsuperscript{45} For him he is caught up with the non essential the non-material, the imaginary and the imaginative: the world of story, the world of the creative imagination. He himself, like his tales, constantly skirts the border between truth and falsehood, the reality and the imagination, so that it is difficult to say whether it is fact or fiction that prevails with him. Sometimes his imagination creates a story that is truer than reality. Once he speaks gravely of visiting his English relatives of marriage in London, describing them in London, describing them in graphic and truthful detail – the only caveat being that they are not his relatives at all, nor has been to London to meet them. The boy blurts out what he believes is the reality, and Tridib’s exciting story falls apart, so that it is difficult to say whether it is fact or fiction that prevails with him. Sometimes, his imagination creates a story that is truer than reality; once he does not speak gravely of visiting his English relatives – the only care at being that they are not his relatives at all, nor has be been to London to meet them. The boy blurts out what he believes is the reality and Tridib’s exciting story falls apart so that the truth of his account of the price family is dismissed: the irony being, of course, that they do literally become his relatives by marriage in course of time.

Tridib’s niece Ila sometimes comes to Calcutta, and the boy tries to remind her of their shared experiences, she cannot understand how, sitting in a little room in Calcutta, ‘Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and…. Eyes to see them with.’\textsuperscript{46} Ila has travelled all over the world with her parents, but too great an exposure to reality has erased the magic from her eyes, so that all those places on the map which are to him a set of magical talismans' are for her merely familiar, common – place, dull, significant only by virtue of the position of Ladies toilets in the airport lounges, which become for her the signs of stability, ‘the only
fixed points in the shifting landscapes of her childhood.” She is therefore irritated by the narrator’s enthusiasm for the London underground. ‘To her the underground was merely a means of shifting venue’, and he comments:

*I could not persuade her that a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one’s imagination; that her practical, bustling London was no less invented than mine, neither more nor less true, only very far apart. It was not her fault that she could not understand, for as Tridib often said of her, the inventions she lived in moved with her, so that although she had lived in many places, she had never travelled at all.*

Ila believes that her emphasis on reality has had a salutary effect on the narrator: ‘at least you learnt that those cities you saw on maps were real places, not like those fairylands Tridib made up for you! But Tridib, the archeologist who makes the past come alive for the present, has never believed in fairytales: what he had taught the boy was to use ‘imagination with precision.’ For instance, when Ila’s mother described an encounter with a snake in Colombo, the boy tries to earn his mentors approval by asking what kind of snake it was. Tridib, however, is disappointed. The snake has little to do with real life, and what kind it is merely factual information; what is interesting, rather, is to imagine life under a sloping roof, so unlike the flat ones of Calcutta. This is what reality is, something that must be seen and known through the imagination, which works out of ‘real desire’, a longing for everything that was not in oneself, a torment of the flesh, that carried one beyond the limits of one’s mind to other times and other places, and even, if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one’s image in mirror. The mirror image repeated later in the novel too, is especially significant, for it is the traditional symbols. Art is expected to represent or reflect reality, and the novel is a mirror walking

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along a highway, in stendhal’s picturesque phrase: but how far a mirror image is real and how far a distortion of ‘reality’ is to be questioned. As Michel Zeraffa observes, ‘the “real” is what fate must reveal, sooner or later, for us to know. Fiction, on the other hand, consists in what can never be brought to our knowledge except through “splendidly wandering” thoughts and desires.’51 – through that is the imagination, which is thus no less ‘real’ than so – called ‘reality’.

Indeed, even the apparently unimaginative Ila cannot do without imagination. As a child her only souvenirs of the faraway places she has lived in are the Yearbooks of her schools – ‘The places themselves went past her in an illusory whirl of movement’52 - with photographs of her fellow – students, about whom she weaves many stories. So the most beautiful and talented among them are her special friends, and yet she herself is never photographed with them; and when she finds that her cousin has discovered a photograph of a boy she has claimed to be her boyfriend with his arms around other girls, while Ila herself stands a little apart from everybody else, the page with the incriminating photograph is torn from the book. The boy realizes then that the exotic and unapproachable Ila is like him after all. Creating her own reality her own space, out of her imagination.

Similarly, when Ila teaches her cousin to play houses with her in the dark basement of the family house in the village, she talks about Nick Price, with whom she has evidently played this game before and whom she describes as coming to her rescue when she is attacked by a group of racist children in London. It is only later that the adult narrator learns what the reality was like: that Nick was ashamed of her and had certainly not gone to her aid at all. Ila is obviously in love with Nick and she inveigles him into marrying her, with her father’s money as bait; but
she soon discovers that Nick does not care for her and is openly unfaithful. The only way in which she can copes with the situation is by pretending to herself and to her cousin that the reality is actually imaginary and that the imaginary world of well – being she creates is the reality.

Everyone in the novel, in fact, hovers over *The Shadow Lines* between imagination and reality; everyone has his or her stories and memories that are based partly on imagination, partly on reality, and when they are retold they are relived as well. They interlink and participate in each retelling. They interlink and participate in each other, so that in the end boundary between fact and fiction, imagination and reality, disappears, and everything becomes part of an imaginatively perceived experience of real life. *The Shadow Lines* between people and between the countries they inhabit and call their own, too, merge and become one. When, therefore, Ila shouts out that she has chosen to leave India and live in London because she wants to be free of her past, of her people and of the inhibitions they impose on her, the narrator shouts back at her, “You can never be free of me…….if I were to die tomorrow you would not be free of me. You cannot be free of me because I within you…. just as you are within me! 53

Imagination is not just a part of reality, it can and does create it own reality. Rumour can start a riot; so that the story of the loss of the prophet’s hair in faraway Srinagar can kill Indian Hindus in Dhaka and make vast crowds of people believe that their water supply has been poisoned and break up friendship in Calcutta. For it is imagination links people together, not the fact of geographical contiguity. The Bengali feels close to Calcutta than Delhi or Srinagar; while in places in Europe as far away from each other, for there is no imaginative connection.
between them. Indeed, the physical fact of geographical boundaries between nations is of no real importance the border drawn between the two Bengals which has in fact pulled them even closer together, 'So close that I, in Calcutta, had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the lien that was to set us free-our looking-glass border.'

Facts can in fact distort reality much more than imagination can. Thus the intensely felt horrors and the betrayals of the riots in Bengal following the theft of the Prophet’s hair hardly find a mention in the newspapers outside Bengal, and when the narrator recalls the event his friends suggest that 'he might have imagined it all. He is naturally unnerved by the possibility that he had lived for all those years with a memory of an imagined event.' until he remembers that the riot had coincided with a test match in Madras. Searching through the papers of that day he finally discovers a brief mention about them – except that the report is about Khulna, not about Calcutta or Dhaka. The riots in these two cities of Bengal have 'dropped out of memory into the crater of a volcano of silence,' because neither the newspaper nor the reader was at the time or later imaginatively involved with what had happened then. To bring them back to light now requires the narrator to make the strangest journey of all: 'a voyage into a land outside space, an expanse without distances; a land of looking glass events.' Reality is as subjective as the imagination; facts are not, and so cannot be as true as imaginatively comprehended experience.

Perhaps the character who most clearly illustrates this is the narrators grandmother, posited from the beginning of the novel as
Tridib’s unconventionality, but Tridib can sympathize imaginatively with her, and sums her up as

*a modern middle – class woman though not wholly, for she would not permit herself the self deceptions that make up the fantasy world of that kind of person. All she wanted was a middle – class life in which like the middle classes the world over, she would thrive believing in the unity of nationhood and territory, of self respect and national power: that was all she wanted – a modern middle class life, a small thing that history had denied her in its fullness and for which she could never forgive it.*^58

For her nationality is not something nebulous an ambiguous but a reality built over 'hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed......They know they’re nation because they’ve drawn their borders with blood...That’s what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood.'^59 As a young girl in the turbulent years of the freedom struggle she had seen for herself what shedding blood for the sake of the country had meant, and she had been inspired enough by the freedom-fighters to join the terrorist movement, even to kill, for her cause, and she retains this fierceness till the end. That is why she believes Ila is wrong to make England her country; if she does so, it is 'because she's greedy; she’s gone there for money.'^60 The grandmother knows that Ila’s claim to be free outside India is false; freedom cannot be bought ‘for the price of an air ticket’, for it is much more than being ‘left alone to do what please.’^61 Ila’s horizons are Shrunken because she does not use her imagination to find out the real meaning of freedom. The narrator knows, however, that freedom lies in being bound and in living with the clamor of voices within him that his imagination gives rise to: the freedom to imagine and to feel.
The grandmother is so angry about her grandson’s defense of Ila that she believes he shares the young woman’s view of freedom and that, accordingly, he must be visiting prostitutes in Delhi, where he is studying; she even writes to the dean his college complaining about his character and demanding his expulsion. The narrator easily denies the charges; but the fact remains that her imagination has not run too far away from reality.” As she sinks into dementia following her retirement, she lives more and more in her imaginary world and rejects the ‘real’ one.

The grandmother’s memories of the Dhaka of her Childhood are so sharp, vivid and concrete that her grandson can easily visualize it for himself, in another kind of imaginative reconstruction of reality. When she gets an opportunity to go there again as an old woman, she is at first a little reluctant, for reality often destroys memories and dreams. But she convinces herself that she has a mission ahead, to rescue her ‘old uncle living alone in their old family house, although he and her father had long been estranged. She is full of excitement when her plans are finalized, but not because, she hoped to see the border between India and east Pakistan from the plane. She cannot believe that there are no liens or marks to separate the two countries; obviously, then partition has failed, if things are as they used to before with no definite boundaries; it has merely made has, and thousands like her, aliens in their own home.

Dhaka itself no longer seems the same Dhaka, but it is only when she and Mayadebi see their old house that reality overtakes memory and imagination. The house is changed beyond recognition, but the uncle has not: he clings to the only reality he knows, the old family feud, and refuses to go with them. “Once you start moving you never stop...It’s

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all very well you’re going 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 anywhere”. And when he does agree to move, it is the end for him. The stay at home can survive, because his imagination keeps him alive; reality can kill.

The old uncle’s end is the end also for Tridib who had accompanied the two elderly ladies to their ancestral home to rescue their recalcitrant relative. On their way back, the riots break out and their car is attacked by a frenzied mob. They would have got away had it not been for May, the girl he is in love with, the kind considerate girl whose honesty is assailed so scornfully as barren by her brother Nick and who is distressed by what the Victoria memorial symbolizes, the harsh reality of power games. On the Indian streets she had once killed a dying dog, run over by Tridib’s car, with her penknife; now in Dhaka she re enacts what she had done then with Tridib as her victim. For she sees coming behind them the old uncle in a rickshaw pulled by his trusted Khalil and when the mob goes after them instead. May jumps out of the car, against everybody’s advise, to help them and Tridib runs after her to help her, as he had always done. She herself is untouched, for she is ‘an English memsahib’ but the old man, the rickshaw pulled and Tridib are slaughtered. May realized how that her earlier kindness had been insensitive, and that it was because of her Tridib died. Clearly, then kindness is not enough if it is not accompanied by understanding, which is the gift of imagination. For years May has blamed herself for his death. But now she has seen the reality behind Tridib’s death:

*He gave himself up; it was a sacrifice. I know I can’t understand it I know I mustn’t try for any real sacrifice is a mystery.*
Ultimately, then, it is imagination which triumphs, for it gives her and the narrator and the reader a glimpse of a final redemptive mystery that must remain distanced from reality.

To conclude, the two parts of the book in *The Shadow Lines* are named 1) Going Away 2) Coming Home. These names are very significant. In fact, coming and going, arriving and leaving, meeting and parting- all metaphors of movement are very important with Amitav Ghosh. His vision seems to be moving around these two polarities—coming and going. Going Away section comes to an end with Ila’s marriage and her going on honeymoon. Coming Home section begins with Tha’mma retirement farewell, her coming home and ends in the narrator and May lying arms in arms having unfolded the Tridib’s death. ‘Going Away’ probably symbolizes the author’s going away from his real self. Ila is mirage. His futile chase to get her is nothing but his drifting apart from his self. It symbolizes deviation from self. ‘Coming Home’, it naturally follows, is the narrators coming to terms with his self and life. It is journey back home; not running away from roots. After Tha’mma’s retirement come the family roots business and her Dhaka trip. One cannot go on living just like that. One has to sort out one’s post for oneself. And family is part of one’s self. Tha’mma and Tridib are part and parcel of the narrator’s self. Therefore he comes home with his understanding of Tridib’s death. At last to say that the narrator has no personality, no identity, and no mark of his own. It is his childhood desires to be Tridib, to be in Tridib’s shoes. And that is exactly what he does at the end of the novel, ‘(.....)’ when we (he and May) lay in each other’s arm’s quietly (....), as he puts it.
Reference:

3) Ibid., P.28.
4) Ibid., P.8.
5) Ibid., P.15.
6) Ibid., P.19.
7) Ibid., P.3.
8) Ibid., P.49.
9) Ibid., P.50.
10) Ibid., P.46.
11) Ibid., P.73.
12) Ibid., P.239.
13) Ibid., P.5.
15) Ibid., p.167.
16) Ibid., P.174.
17) Ibid., P.251-252.
18) Ibid., P.22.
19) Ibid., P.180.
20) Ibid., P.170.
21) Ibid., P.33.
22) Ibid., P.215.
23) Ibid., P.88-89.
24) Ibid., P.203.

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27) Ibid., P.218.

28) Ibid., P.233.

29) Ibid., P.238.

30) Ibid., P.169.

31) Ibid., P.169.

32) Ibid., P.170.

33) Ibid., P.171.

34) Ibid., P.44.

35) Ibid., P.42.

36) Ibid., P.146.


38) A.K. Ramnajan. Pre-publication comment on the back of the jacket of the novel.

39) ‘A political novel is open in which political ideas play a dominant role of in which the political milieu is the dominant setting’ according to Irvin Hows definition in *The ideas of the political Novel* NY: Fawcett; 1967. P.19.


41) Ibid., P.16.

45) Ibid., P.4.
46) Ibid., P.20.
47) Ibid., P.20.
48) Ibid., P.21.
49) Ibid., P.24.
50) Ibid., P.29.
51) Ibid., P.57.
52) Ibid., P.23.
53) Ibid., P.89.
54) Ibid., P.233.
55) Ibid., P.222.
56) Ibid., P.230.
57) Ibid., P.224.
58) Ibid., P.78.
59) Ibid., P.77-78.
60) Ibid., P.79.
61) Ibid., P.89.
62) Ibid., P.93.
63) Ibid., P.215.
64) Ibid., P.250.
65) Ibid., P.251.
66) Ibid., P.251-252.
67) Ibid., P.252.