CHAPTER 3

THE BLURRING BORDERS:
POST-COLONIAL TRAVEL IN THE SHADOW LINES

The Indian novel in English was conceived and perfected when India was struggling to overthrow colonial dependency on Britain. This depiction of nationalistic fervour and oneness of identity is perfectly illustrated in Raja Rao’s Kanthapura (1938). The village Kanthapura represents a homogenous community where people forget their internal differences of caste, creed and religion and become united against their common foe—the British. This is a typical post-colonial novel where the exploited or colonised are against the coloniser. But after independence the tendency of novelists to depict homogenous communities has changed to the depiction of a world beyond the petty boundaries of caste, religion, state and nation. This is exemplified in Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children (1981). The Shadow Lines is an attempt by Amitav Ghosh to show the Blurring of lines or borders between East and West, castes and religious beliefs through an unconventional post-colonial novel which shows the colonised travelling and moving to and from the coloniser’s territory. But the instigation or the impetus to present such a world sans boundaries, ironically enough, comes through a personal experience of communal riots. An essay entitled The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi published in 1995 records Ghosh’s personal experience of the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 in Delhi. Amitav Ghosh confesses:
“Within a few months I started my novel, which I eventually called The Shadow Lines, a book that led me backwards in time, to earlier memories of riots, ones witnessed in childhood. It became a book about the meaning of such events and their effects on the individuals who live through them.”

The conventional Indian novel in English reinforces the classical notion of discrete cultures and a world full of distinctly marked divisions. But The Shadow Lines breaks the convention in the very beginning. ‘In 1939, thirteen years before I was born, my father’s aunt, Mayadebi went to England with her husband and son, Tridib.’ The novel makes the natives of the colonised country, the travellers who go to England, the country of their colonisers, whereas in a conventional colonial novel the westerners are made to travel to India, a country with an ancient fixed and a self-contained culture.

“Ghosh’s novels occupy a unique place in the arena of post-colonial literature – they critique both globalisation and post-colonial nationalism, by depicting the experiences of those in transition, those in between nation states, those going back and forth as travellers and migrants in search of lost homes and better lives.”

Robert Dixon speaks about the way The Shadow Lines is different in its approach from conventional post-colonial novels.

“The central fact of travel in this Indian family’s experience immediately demands that we modify our expectations about Indian culture and the way it is depicted in English novels about the Raj. Furthermore, these Indians are going abroad in 1939, the year Britain declared
war on Germany. Classical ethnography assumes that the culture of the western observer is a stable and coherent point, from which to observe native society. Ghosh undermines the notion by depicting Britain at war with Germany, so that partition takes place against the background of an equally unstable Europe. The parallels between England and Germany and India and Pakistan—effectively undermine any distinction between East and West, colony and metropolis, and point to similarities and continuities that cut across these differences.  

The historical consciousness that the novel carries in its background is a result of several momentous events and an occasional obscure one. It includes the freedom movement in Bengal, the Second World War, the partition of India and the miasma of communal hatred breaking out into riots in East Pakistan (Now Bangladesh) following the Hazratbal shrine incident in Srinagar in 1964. The novel does not depict or present these political and social upheavals in a straightforward manner, rather each of his characters lives through the emotional trauma which is a consequence of these happenings. This traumatic experience is not limited to a particular community or people of one nationality, but it engulfs characters irrespective of their geographical and social place in this world full of man-made divisions.

Like Ghosh’s first novel *The Circle of Reason, The Shadow Lines*, too revolves around the diaspora of East Pakistan after the partition. The narrator’s family are Hindus who fled from their home in Dhaka and Calcutta after the formation of East Pakistan. When Europe itself is completely shattered due to the Second World War, they become friends with the Prices, an English family,
obliterating the cultural divide, and making the English family experience the horrors and participate in the very climactic event in the life of the Indian family. The metaphor of travel as a means of bridging boundaries and bringing about cultural crossings is carried out throughout the entire time span covered by the novel and through all the variegated characters. The plot of the novel revolves around these two families the Datta Chaudhuris of Bengal and the Prices of London and the narrator’s relationship with them. The lives of these two families are constantly intersecting and intertwining and it’s the unnamed narrator who weaves the various threads together. Mrs. Price’s father who initiated the long relationship between theirs and the narrator’s family lived in India before independence. The narrator’s very eccentric uncle Tridib, went to London and lived with the Prices during the war. The narrator, who remains an anonymous ‘I’ throughout the narrative, is Tridib’s alter ego and he also continues this pattern of dwelling in travel. The history of London had been made alive to the narrator, through the stories Ila used to tell him and Tridib, who believed in inventing every place in one’s imagination. The narrator is writing shortly after his arrival from England, where he too becomes involved with the Prices. The core of the whole story is the tragic incident of Tridib’s murder in old Dhaka by an angry mob, where they went because of the grandmother’s background in East Bengal. The three persons who play a significant role in the life of the narrator are his uncle Tridib, Ila, and his grandmother. But it’s Tridib who exercises the greatest influence on the narrator and helps him evolve into adulthood where he’s able to discard all restricting boundaries and is able to invent places in his
imagination. The political, regional and linguistic lines become blurred, as the narrator’s consciousness and memory become an organizing place, where the lives of three generations of his family are woven together, as are the cities in which their lives have been acted out: Dhaka, Calcutta and London.

“He does not inhabit a culture rooted in a single place, but a discursive space that flows across political and national boundaries, and even across generations in time.”

The metaphor of travel as a means of bridging boundaries and bringing about cultural crossings is carried out throughout the entire time span covered by the novel and through all the variegated characters. Mrs. Price’s father, who initiated the long relationship between theirs and the narrator’s family, lived in India before independence, and is a type of travelling Englishman who left his home in Cornwall to travel widely in the Empire: in Malaysia, Fiji, Ceylon and finally Calcutta. The narrator’s very eccentric uncle Tridib, went to London and lived with the Prices during the war. The tradition is followed by the narrator who also dwells in travel.

The Shadow Lines is an apt revelation of the fragility of partition, borderlines between countries and the cartographical lines which claim to separate people and communities. He gives the metaphor of the looking glass to these borderlines wherein every populace sees its own image reflected in the land on the other side of the border. In Ghosh’s conception border line is not a division that brings about a fundamental change in the identity of people on either side of the border. The narrator himself speaks about the evolution in his thoughts. He confesses that, he “...believed in the
reality of space. I believed that distance separates, that it is a corporeal substance; I believed in the reality of nations and borders; I believed that across the border there existed another reality. The only relationship my vocabulary permitted between those separate realities was war or friendship” (TSL, p. 219). When he tries to reach the depth of the happenings and researches newspaper accounts of a communal riot in Calcutta in 1962 which he remembered from his childhood, he realizes “...sitting in the air-conditioned calm of an exclusive library, I began on my strangest journey, a voyage into a land outside space, an expanse without distances; a land of looking glass events” (TSL, p. 224).

The looking glass events described here are the violent riots that erupted simultaneously in Calcutta and across the border in Dhaka over the stealing of Mui-i-Mubarak in Srinagar. The narrator realizes in the course of his research that an “... indivisible sanity binds people to each other independently of their governments” (TSL, p. 230). The similarity of experiences combined with a history when the Cultures of the sub-continent were one, brings the people of the subcontinent together and keeps them bound in spite of geographical separation.

“It is this, that set apart the thousand million people who inhabit the subcontinent from the rest of the world-not language, not food, not music it is the special quality of loneliness that grows out of fear of the war between oneself and one’s image in the mirror” (TSL, p. 204).

*The Shadow Lines* shows how the borders of India and Pakistan see violence that destroys communities and displaces populations as refugees. Yet, this common bloodshed makes
apparent the connections that the two nations had tried to efface through cartographical lines:

“They had drawn their borders, believing in that pattern, in the enchantment of lines, hoping perhaps that once-they had etched their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of prehistoric Gondwanaland” (TSL, p. 233).

The violence and riots that breakout in both the countries due to something that happened in Srinagar, lays bare the futility of these separations. The narrator wonders:

“...what had they felt I wondered, when they discovered that they had created not a separation, but a yet undiscovered irony – the irony that killed Tridib: the simple facts that there had never been a moment in the four thousand year – old history of that map, when the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines – so closely 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 line that was to set us free - our looking-glass border” (TSL, p. 233).

It is the collective consciousness and the memory of common historical events that transcends the boundaries of nations and brings people of different countries together. The novel illustrates how the two cities of Dhaka and Calcutta are separated from the countries they are geographically a part of, and binds them in the narrator’s consciousness through a common suffering. This is the reason why the narrator, Robi and Ila crave for a different kind of
freedom, a freedom from memory that haunts them. Robi comments ironically:

“You know if you look at the pictures on the front pages of the newspapers at home now, all those pictures of dead people in Assam, the North-east, Punjab, Sri Lanka, Tripura – people shot by terrorists and separatists and the army and the police, you’ll find somewhere behind it all the single word; everyone’s doing it to be free” (TSL, p. 247).

This urge for a freedom from memory is in strong contrast to the narrator’s grandmother’s conception of freedom which she would once have even killed, to attain. During her student days she too had wanted to earn some glory by helping the terrorist organisations who were fighting for the country’s freedom, by running errands for them or even cooking for them and washing their clothes. In response to the narrator’s question, “Do you really mean Tha’mma, that you would have killed him?” We are told thus: She put her hands on my shoulder and holding me in front of her, looking directly at me, her eyes steady, forthright, unwavering: “I would have been frightened... But I would have prayed for strength and God willing yes, I would have killed him (the English Magistrate). It was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free” (TSL, p. 39). Tha’mma’s childhood and her subsequent struggles have taught her the necessity of political freedom which subsequently leads to other more individualistic freedoms like intellectual and social freedom. Novy Kapadia aptly points out:

“By exploring connections, distinctions and possibilities, Amitav Ghosh shows that in a changing world, different strands of nationalism
and ideology will exist and even compete. The force of nationalism and ideology will exist and even compete. The force of nationalism in the quest for freedom or ideology is often a source of violence. So the ‘Shadow Line’ between people and nations is often mere illusion. The force and appeal of nationalism cannot be wished away (so easily), just as death by a communal mob in the bylanes of old Dhaka.”

But the futility of these political boundaries is realised by Tha’mma at Tridib’s death. Dhaka was her place of birth and as a young girl she had thought of fighting for the freedom of East Bengal. But the very people and nation for whom she had been willing to sacrifice herself are the cause of her sorrow in 1964. The struggle against the British in Dhaka had been motivated by feelings of nationalism towards Bangladesh. But in 1964 that very loyal group of people, coming from India in the embassy car become the enemies to be hunted and killed.

Ila presents a conception of freedom entirely different from that of the grandmother, a freedom which is more individualistic and personalised. Ila despises everything Indian and tries to seek an identity for herself in a foreign land. “Do you now see why I’ve chosen to live in London? It’s only because I want to be free. Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you” (TSL, p. 89). She cries out when Robi stops her from dancing with an unknown businessman in a nightclub. Robi tries to check her behaviour saying that “Girls don’t behave like that here. There are certain things you can’t do here, that’s our culture” (TSL, p. 88). Ila spends her entire life travelling across the world but in the end
finds herself lonely and miserable without a sense of belonging anywhere in the world. She feels herself an alien to the conservative Indian culture and tries to find herself by identifying with the west. She marries Nick in this search for roots, who ill treats her and is unfaithful to her. In the end she tries to find solace with the narrator and Robi, members of her own family.

“Her attempt to adopt an alien culture proves abortive and at the end she finds the need to go back to her family. The novel scoffs at national leaders who had believed that problems could be solved by drawing lines across the land. Both Bengals are historically, culturally and geographically one, and a division was not a solution to the traditional Hindu–Muslim animosity.”

The Prices and Datta Chaudhuris contact which brings together Tridib and May is another study of a connection where borders dissolve under the weight of mutual love and compassion. A romantic relationship develops between Tridib and May, rising above the ‘shadow lines’ of nationality and cultural boundary. This affectionate and empathetic relation between the two families at a time when the two countries were pitted against each other is the main theme of the novel.

“The author questions the validity of geographical boundaries and celebrates the union of aliens pulled together by self propelling empathy and attachment. Tridib and May, Jethamoshai and Khalil rise above the prevailing passion of war, hatred and communal bad blood and vindicate the political logic of partition and border demarcation to define national and cultural particularities.”
The Tridib – May affair can be seen as a remarkable tool used by Amitav Ghosh to survive in a cold world of separatism and narrow segregations.

“The novel addresses the challenge of geographical fluidity and cultural dislocations with a new consciousness and firm grasp of socio-cultural and historical material, the experience of aliens and immigrants in post-colonial project of cultural assimilation, friendship across borders and adjustment with the altered face of the world.”9

The Tridib – May love transcends all borderlines and shadow lines. The narrator is highly influenced by Tridib’s viewpoint of looking at the world. Tridib has always advised him to invent and not just take the world as it appears superficially. He said that:

“...we could not see without inventing what we saw, so at least we could try to do it properly.”

... it “only meant that if we don’t try ourselves, we would never be free of other people’s inventions” (TSL, p. 31).

The narrator’s travels in his imagination are in sharp contrast to Ila’s pragmatic approach towards the world she lives in:

“I tried to tell her, but neither then nor later, though we talked about it often, did I ever succeed in explaining to her that I could not forget because Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with; she who had been travelling around the world since she was a child, could never understand what those hours in Tridib’s room had meant to me, a boy who had never been more than a few hundred miles from Calcutta. I used to listen to her talking sometimes with her father and grandfather about the cafes in the
Plaza Mayor in Madrid, or the crispness of the air in Cuzco and I could see that those names, which were to me a set of magical talismans because Tridib had pointed out to me on his tattered old Bartholomew’s atlas, had for her a familiarity no less than the lake had for me and my friends; the same tired intimacy that made us stop on our way back from the park in the evening and unbutton our shorts and aim our piss through the wrought iron railings” (TSL, p. 20).

The two part structure of *The Shadow Lines* takes its cue from a classic colonial novella by Joseph Conrad, *The Shadow Line* (1917). Conrad explains in the very preface of the text that ‘the shadow line’ is the invisible line dividing youth from maturity. The protagonist is a young naval officer, who is to command a ship and take it from south-East Asia back to London. While the protagonist successfully overcomes difficult circumstances and crosses the shadow line to maturity, the novelist dwells upon the opposition between East and West, Europe and the Orient and the need to crossover these shadow lines. Although Ghosh’s characters globe trot from one part of the world to another jumping not just political and physical boundaries but also psychological divides, the novel is divided by him into two parts, ‘Going Away’ and ‘Coming Home’ overlooking the identities of nations. But Amitav Ghosh’s characters move in so many directions that ultimately the identity of a distinct and discrete homeland becomes blurred and the world where no boundaries of race or caste are acknowledged, becomes one big home and the real home lies in one’s memory and consciousness away from all lines.
The concept of ‘Home’ is further problematized in the second part of the novel when the narrator’s grandmother returns to visit her paternal home in Dhaka in 1964. But this homecoming is full of ironies and complications. His grandmother wants to bring her uncle back from East Pakistan, the land of their Muslim enemies, to her home in Calcutta – but Dhaka is her birthplace, the home to which she goes back. Grandmother, in the novel represents the classical conception of cultures. She feels nostalgic for the old world when there were marked divisions politically as well as culturally. This is evident in her criticism of narrator’s cousin Ila, for living in England:

“...Ila has no right to live there... It took those people a long time to build that country; hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood: with their brother’s blood and their father’s blood and their son’s blood. They know they’re a 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” (TSL, p. 78).

When the grandmother looks down from the plane on her flight from Calcutta to Dhaka she is surprised when she finds no physically visible divisions on the border. She asks,

‘... if there aren’t any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean where’s the difference then? And if there’s no difference both sides will be the same, it’ll be just like it used to be before’ (TSL, p. 151).
The narrator’s father’s reply to this, represents truly the modern day’s conception and embodiment of borders.

“This is the modern world. The border isn’t on the frontier: it’s right inside the airport. You’ll see. You’ll cross it when you have to fill in all those disembarkation cards and things” (TSL, p. 151).

The narrator however realizes his grandmother’s passion for perfection and neatness. “She liked things to be neat and in place – and at that moment she had not been able quite to understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality” (TSL, p. 152).

The final shock to her conservative view of the world comes when the elderly relative in Dhaka refuses to go back to Calcutta. He even refuses to acknowledge its existence:

“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 anywhere” (TSL, p. 215).

It is pertinent here to cite Robert Dixon’s comment:

“The Shadow Lines is therefore, a fictional critique of classical anthropology’s model of discrete cultures and the associated ideology of nationalism. The reality is the complex web of relationships between people that cut across nations and across generations.”

But contrary to the grandmother, the narrator realises when he comes to know about the real manner in which Tridib was killed, the futility and illusory nature of these border lines on the maps in
atlases. He takes Tridib’s old atlas and measures the distances between nations with a compass. He realizes to his chagrin that physical distance has nothing to do with cultural space.

“I was struck with wonder that there had really been a time, not so long ago, when people, sensible people of good intention had thought ... that there was a special enchantment in lines... what had they felt, I wondered, when they discovered that... there had never been a moment in the 4000 years old history of that map when the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other - than after they had drawn their lines” (TSL, p. 233).

These ideas find culmination at the end of the novel, in the sexual union between May Price and the narrator on his last night in London, which gives him ‘the glimpse of ... a final redemptive mystery’ (TSL, p. 252), the mystery that human experience and relations are far above the artificial and illusory borders of nation and race. The narrator detests and marvels at the undue and perverting importance that people invest in the lines of maps. He despises the people’s mania for defining their identity in terms of which side of the border they are on. According to him it is this craze to concretize who “we” are that has led to his uncle’s brutal death. Each city (Dhaka and Calcutta) was the mirror image of the other. The irony of the situation is that when it came to the perpetration of violence, the cities Dhaka and Calcutta were the closest to each other, even though concrete border lines had been drawn between them on the map, and the brutal example is the murder of Tridib in riots in Dhaka.
Strongly disturbed and ired by Tridib’s murder, his younger brother Robi puts the question in angry terms,

“...why don’t they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every little place a new name? What would it change? It’s a mirage; the whole thing is a mirage. How can anyone divide a memory?” (TSL, p. 247)

The arbitrariness and illusory nature of physical distances is very aptly illustrated by the narrator when he discovers that the reason of the riots in Calcutta and Dhaka was the theft, of the prophet’s hair Mui-i-Mubarak from a mosque in Srinagar. He draws a circle on a map with Khulna at its centre and Srinagar on its circumference.

He observes:

“Khulna is not quite one hundred miles from Calcutta as the crow flies: the two cities face each other at a watchful equidistance across the border... I discovered that Khulna is about as far from Srinagar as Tokyo is from Beijing or Moscow from Venice, or Washington from Havana, or Cairo from Naples... Hanoi and Chungking are nearer Khulna than Srinagar and yet did the people of Khulna care at all about the fate of the mosques in Vietnam and South China (a mere stone’s throw away)? I doubted it but in the other direction it took no more than a week” (TSL, p. 232).

Robi, the narrator and other members of the family share this particular trauma which is the result of a larger national trauma called the Partition. *The Shadow Lines* is thus a novel dealing with the effect of fear on memory, a fear shared by the whole of the subcontinent even though the sub-continent is no more a complete
whole but a crisscross of borderlines which makes an individual’s home, the most unsafe place for him in the world.

“We were stupefied with fear... It is a fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets that one inhabits can become suddenly and without warning, as hostile as a desert in a flash flood. It is this that separates the thousand million people who inhabit the subcontinent from the rest of the world – not language, not food, not music, - it is the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of war between oneself and one’s image in the mirror” (TSL, p. 204).

Tridib, throughout his life span has always desired a freedom from arbitrary borders and distinctions and the consequent increase in hatreds and mutual rivalries and a return to a true world full of harmonies and affection. The narrator like most who’re brought up on geographical atlases and text books elaborating on borders and boundary lines, believes in these fixtures and remarks:

“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... I was a child, and like all the children around me, I grew up believing in the truth of the precepts that were available to me: I believed in the reality of space; I believed that distance separates, that it is a corporeal substance, I believed in the reality of nations and border; I believed that across the border there existed another reality” (TSL, p. 218-219).

The nostalgic yearning, of our generation for something secure and a life full of self-respect and national power is very
eloquently illustrated in the character of the narrator’s grandmother.

“All she wanted was a middle class life in which, like the middle classes the world over, she would thrive believing in the unit 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” (TSL, p. 78).

She articulates this yearning in her own words when she reprimands Ila for staying in England: “[The English] know they’re a nation because they’ve drawn their borders with blood... That’s what it takes to make a country” (TSL, p. 78).

The non-linear narrative of the novel also in a way, seems to endorse this desire for an obliteration of borders, by desiring a union between past and present. The narrative takes the characteristics of a palimpsest with past seeping through to the present. Under Tridib’s tutelage, the narrator becomes a walking tour guide for streets and houses in London, knowing about them even before visiting them. Making narrator as Tridib’s alter ego Tridib’s relationship with May, where Tridib expresses a desire to meet May at a place where there’s no history, no culture, a place that is neutral, is carried forward by the narrator. The meeting of East and West is symbolically presented in the scene when Tridib meets his death, or in May’s words sacrifices himself to achieve a state where people stop believing in these lines and borders not just physical but also psychological. It was because of this mental barrier of hatred between people of same geographical location but
different religions that May a foreigner is safe amid such brutal violence. As May reveals to the narrator,

“I was safe you see I could have gone right into that mob, and they wouldn’t have touched me, an English memsahib, but he must have known he was going to die... For years I was arrogant enough to think I owed him his life. But I know now I didn’t kill him. I couldn’t have, if I’d wanted. He gave himself up; it was a sacrifice...” (TSL, p. 251).

The novel reveals very poignantly the complexity of partition borders and the looking glass metaphor wherein the border reflects not just geographical features but also the innate nature of people on either side. Kavita Dahiya throws light on this complexity:

“The Shadow Lines reveals the fragility of partition borders between nations as etched out in maps, and of the frontiers policed by nation states that separate people, communities and families. However, Ghosh does this not to celebrate globalization but to argue that communities are transnational, through the work of historical memory. He suggests that the nature of boundaries can be understood through the metaphor of the looking glass: the national border between the people of India and West Pakistan resembles the mirror’s boundary, in which self and reflected other are the same (joined in visual and corporal simultaneity). Therefore, in Ghosh’s narrative, the borderline cannot destroy the fundamental identity of people on both sides of the boundary or render him changed into ‘the other’.”

*The Shadow Lines* is thus a non-sequential journey moving back and forth from past to present and back again but centring on the nucleus of the event of Tridib’s murder. The novel is
remarkable for its psychological insight into the effect of fear on
the memory of the subcontinent’s people and above all for its
treatment of nations, borders and boundaries as futile, illusory and
unnecessary, emphasizing the need to overcome these man-made
physical and mental barriers. This was precisely the reason why he
always told the narrator to invent place, so that we can be free from
other people’s misleading and subjective inventions. “Tridib… had
said that we could not see without inventing what we saw, so at
least we could try to do it properly. And then, because she shrugged
dismissively and said: Why? Why should we try, why not just take
the world as it is? I told her how he had said we had to try because
the alternative wasn’t blankness it only meant that if we didn’t try
ourselves, we would never be free of other people’s inventions”
(TSL, p. 31). Murari Prasad observes:

“The Shadow Lines as a seminal piece of
fiction, does bring out the rare and remarkable
talent of Ghosh, who passionately searches for
strategies for survival in a violent, hate filled
world of narrow divisions and finds in love the
enabling and productive action to tide over
separatist propensities of communities and
nationality groups. The novel addresses the
challenge of geographical fluidity and cultural
dislocations with a new consciousness and firm
grasp of socio-cultural and historical materials.
The experience of aliens and immigrants in
post-colonial setting furnish us with the clue to
the novel’s larger borders and adjustment with
the altered face of the world.”

The Shadow Lines has widely been hailed as the most
important post-colonial fictional work of contemporary Indian
writing in English. It imbibes all the major post-colonial concerns
of our age viz, the search for identity, changing relationship with the coloniser wherein the native travels to the coloniser’s land instead of the conventional oppressor coming to the ruled colony; the use of the individual’s memory and the collective consciousness of the community to understand the country’s past and a language coloured by vernacular usages.

The novel does not celebrate the culture and ethnicity of India, instead Ghosh by making his characters travel to the west gives them the first hand experience of the life of their colonizers which the imaginative Tridib invents for himself, the narrator and even boys from Calcutta streets. But the vision and the cross cultural encounter is limited in that the Indians portrayed here mostly are higher middle class people, who work in foreign missions and agencies and have contacts abroad for instance; Mayadebi’s husband talks to the narrator’s mother about the shortage of kerosene and the high price of fish in Calcutta, but then, it is only a part of his polite posturing. He later confesses to the narrator’s father that these are the precise concerns which should appropriately be voiced when conversing with a third secretary’s wife.

The empire ruled its colonies on the principle of segregation, carrying the white-man’s burden whereas the post-colonial writers insist the equality of cultures irrespective of all separations whether geographical, racial or the more difficult to bridge-psychological. *The Shadow Lines* conforms to this view as his main protagonist Tridib, falls in love with May and Ila, again an Indian marries an Englishman, Nick Price and the developing relationship between
the narrator and May towards the end of the novel is a successful attempt at bridging the cross-cultural gap. In fact, the characters in the novel, but mostly Indians belong to both the worlds and carve out their own niche in the world. Yet except in the case of the narrator and May, this interface between the characters does not lead to happiness and satisfaction. In spite of having being brought up outside India, Ila is a confounded character who is torn between two worlds. Her bragging of her sexual exploits in London in front of the narrator are a manifestation of her confusion and maladjustments. By her western mannerisms she just strives for recognition and acceptability in the English society as she herself confesses to the narrator that she is as chaste as any other Indian girl of her age.

The complexes inherent in the collective colonial consciousness of the natives prompt them to own the colonizer’s world at the cost of their own world. To disown India, Ila revels in shocking her people, especially Tha’mma by her way of dressing and subsequently, even Robi and the narrator by her uninhibited behaviour at a night club in Calcutta where she proposes dance to a complete stranger. When Robi restricts her, she cries out, “Do you see why I have chosen to live in London? [ ] It’s only, because I want to be free [ ] Free of your bloody culture” (TSL, p. 88).

The post-colonial world witnesses a change in the attitude of the colonizer as well, a factor rarely acknowledged in post-colonial literatures, but consciously indited by Ghosh through the character of May. When May comes to Calcutta, she greets Tridib by hugs and kisses, a mistake she becomes conscious of very soon, as she
notices people jeering at them. Later Tridib meets May at the Queen Victoria’s memorial, a place that belongs to India as well as England. But confessing that she came to India out of curiosity, to know what is beyond West Hampstead and not exclusively to meet Tridib, she denounces Queen Victoria’s statue exclaiming, “It shouldn’t be here [ ] it is an act of violence, it is obscene” (TSL, p. 170). Although subsequently, May falls in love with Tridib, but still she cannot comprehend the colonial psyche and leads to disaster for Tridib.

The cultural interaction between coloniser and colonised comes to the fore initially when Ila shares her experiences and yearbooks of international schools, with the narrator. The narrator realizes the real discrimination behind the glamorous picture portrayed by her; when he shares some of Ila’s stories with May, later on. But the narrator’s visit to England, years later, shows a very pleasant change in the attitude of the people of England. This positive change however, escapes Tha’mma who despises all that is western. The grandmother thinks Ila’s western influence will corrupt her grandson. Although she deeply admires the spirit of nationalism in the west and the sacrifices made by them to attain their freedom, but Ila according to her, loves the west for the personal freedom that it affords. The grandmother wants India to achieve a cultural nationalism which would join the entire nation into a single independent entity. She initiates her students to cook food of different states of India so that they become aware of the diversity and unity of Indian culture. The Grandmother wanted the
Indians to overcome their awe and longing for the European culture.

But May, partly because of her ill understanding of the Indian culture and partly in an effort to display superior western social virtues, becomes the cause of Tridib’s death. Not just Tridib in his supreme sacrifice, but the post-colonial desire to assess one’s culture by the standards of the western cultures is also evident in the constant comparison the young narrator makes between himself and Nick Price. Despite May’s keen desire to understand India, she is unable to avert the disaster of Tridib’s death. Similarly Ila’s efforts to be a part of the western civilization also meet with disaster.

*The Shadow Lines* portrays two types of post-colonial characters: one includes the elite class of Mayadebi and Shaheb, and the other like Ila who live in close contact with the West. They want to be a part of the colonizer’s world. Ila’s mother, for instance, sits like Queen Victoria. The grandmother, on the other hand is a perfect foil to such characters. She is a self-respecting individual who is proud to be an Indian. She admires the nationality of the English and wants the Indians too to achieve their own identity. The post-colonial writer’s choice of the coloniser’s language may be an attempt to make the writing back, more effective.

In *The Shadow Lines* the idea of nationhood, freedom and feminism go hand in hand. Ghosh’s chief concern with the erasure of borders and boundaries is a direct questioning of the concept of nationhood. The idea of freedom also has different connotations for
different characters. While the narrator’s grandmother is full of patriotism and nationalist fervour against the colonial power, Ila pines for personal freedom in a post-modern context. A perusal of the novel with a feminist perspective would require a study of the concept of nation and freedom as perceived by the various characters. In her essay, *Of Shadows, Lines and Freedom*, Seema Bhaduri observes:

“Lives of the characters in this novel are determined largely, by their idea of freedom and this idea is shaped by the history of the times [...]. The major characters here, move towards a global humanitarianism coming to grips with the realisation that freedom can’t be geopolitically defined or delimited.”

The narrator’s grandmother thinks of freedom as political freedom from colonisation, for which she could readily sacrifice her life: “I would have done anything to be free, even killed for it” (TSL, p. 89).

Having witnessed the violent anti-colonial struggle of India, she is against Ila’s living in London, as she does not belong there and has not fought for the freedom of that country as they have. She believes in the existence of physical borders and sanctifies them. The characters of Tha’mma and Ila raise the strained relationship between nationalism and individual freedom especially that of its women. Suvir Kaul states that Ila in particular, but also Tha’mma and May: “...are represented as carrying the greatest burden of historical dislocation”

“As we have learnt to expect from the place of women in colonial and post-colonial Indian
society the weight of sexual and cultural definition is borne unequally by men and women, with men as the putative agents of socio-cultural transition and women as its more or less traumatized subjects.”

Feminist theories, bring to light the fact that even the burden of cultural tradition is borne by women, which exerts pressure on them to be exemplars of virtue. Ila wants to settle in London to escape this burden of tradition as she retorts in front of Robi and the narrator when Robi tries to teach her propriety in the nightclub “I want to be free of your bloody culture and free of all of you” (TSL, p. 88-89). But she fails miserably in her attempts at emancipation, when Nick betrays her. “Could I ever have imagined, she said, that I, Ila Datta Chaudhuri, free woman and free spirit would ever live in that state of squalor where incidents in one’s life can be foretold by a bad television serial?” (TSL, p. 187)

In her false bid to achieve freedom she ruins her life. She fits neither in the conservative yet progressive Bengali society, nor in the liberal yet strained society in London. She wins neither Nick’s loyalty nor is she able to identify herself with European culture.

In contrast to Ila and Th’a’mma who are chasing false notions of freedom, May Price comes out as the only female character who, despite an underlying feeling of guilt of Tridib’s death, works diligently towards achieving freedom of individuality and conscience. Even though she is an English woman she has the courage to criticise the empire. She is deeply critical of the huge table which Tridib’s grandfather had brought from London which according to her is a ‘worthless bit of England’ and goes on to say
“I wonder how many roofs that money would have bought for those huts we saw on our way here” (TSL, p. 48). She doesn’t approve of the Victoria memorial. ‘...it shouldn’t be here, she blurted out. It’s an act of violence. It is obscene’ (TSL, p. 170).

Her generosity and empathy with fellow human beings is revealed in her various comments and actions, but she misjudges the riotous situation which costs Tridib his life. She holds the guilt of responsibility for his death till long in life and leads a life of austerity. She confesses to the narrator: ‘your grandmother [...] said, I’d get everyone killed. I didn’t listen, I was a heroine’ (TSL, p. 250). For seventeen long years, she lives an austere life working for global agencies like Amnesty and Oxfam. Gradually, she exonerates herself of the guilt and realizes that Tridib ‘gave himself up, it was a sacrifice’ (TSL, p. 252).

This fruitless march of a few characters for freedom leads us to the conclusion that true freedom is beyond nationalism. This inter-nationalism and ability to look beyond divisions is a privilege given by the author to Tridib and the narrator only.

According to Susan Mills:

“One important aspect of reading gender roles in a text is to look at the ways in which characters are described. Usually elements which are described for the male characters are those which are evident when they are in face to face contact, while the one’s for the female characters are those which have to be observed when the character is portrayed as an object to be seen.”15
The male perspective colours the description of a female character giving it a sexual tint. When Tridib mentions May at Gole Park, his listeners ask him, ‘and what’s she like? […] Sexy?’ (TSL, p. 11). He then goes on to describe May’s features in vivid detail, separately. Ila is also described in terms of how she appears to the narrator her beauty, her clothes and the movement of her body. Contrary to this the male characters are described by comparisons for instance Tridib and the narrator, the narrator and Nick.

The narrator, Tridib, Ila and the grandmother are the most significant characters in the novel. Nick and May though a little apart from the main plot, are still significant for the main characters. The narrator’s parents, Ila’s parents, Mayadebi and the Shaheb, Robi and Mrs. Price are the secondary characters in the novel. Contrary to the female characters, which are mostly described in terms of appearance, the male characters are introduced as professionals – Tridib’s father is a diplomat Jatin Kaku is an economist, and the narrator’s father’s a junior executive. Tridib being the only exception who is an academician unconventional occupation for a male. Amongst the female characters, it’s only the grandmother who has a profession, that of a school teacher, mentioned only in passing. The description of the narrator’s family, which is perceived as an ideal, bears testimony to this “...in our flat all of us worked hard at whatever we did: my grandmother at her scholmistressing, I at my homework, my mother at her housekeeping, my father at his job as a junior executive in a company which dealt with vulcanised rubber” (TSL, p. 4). It is noteworthy here that the only job which is described in some detail
is the main job, that of the father. The father’s status, his career graph is traced faithfully during the course of the novel.

The secondary characters in the novel perform faithfully the roles given to them. The narrator’s mother is a great cook in contrast to the grandmother who makes pathetic omelettes. The father is a hard working successful man who provides for his family and his wife who looks after him with utmost devotion. The other characters fulfil their traditional roles and whom we see through Tridib and the narrator’s imagination. Mrs.Price, Mayadebi and the mother keep their homes safe for their children while the men provide for them. The only distortions are the characters of Ila and the grandmother. Robi in his protective ways and the grandmother in her censure, disapprove of Ila’s desire for freedom which according to them deserves to be curbed. The women characters who transgress are denied peace and satisfaction, the grandmother dies lonely and sick, the narrator, her grandson was not even informed of her death. Ila, in love with Nick, suffers because of his infidelity, and in a desperate attempt at chasing peace of mind, she exercises her economic power over him, but to no avail.

Another factor, conspicuous by its absence, in Ghosh’s novel is the female bonding or the conventional sorority of women bound by common suffering. They are all isolated from each other, none finding solace in each other’s company. Ila, and the grandmother never get along. The narrator’s mother, Ila’s mother, Mayadebi, all are too absorbed in their own worlds, to interact with each other. Ila doesn’t understand May – they have nothing to do with each
other its only May who finds some comfort and solace and that too with the narrator, a male.

_The Shadow Lines_ is not a conventional chronological narrative. For instance the use of significant device like division into ‘Going Away’ and ‘Coming Home’ is used to structure and organise the novel. Novy Kapadia in her essay _Imagination and Politics in Amitav Ghosh’s, The Shadow Lines_ says:

“Amitav Ghosh’s second novel, _The Shadow Lines_ (1988) has a unique narrative technique, sensitive handling of language and perceptive concepts of political issues. It is basically a memory novel, which skilfully weaves together personal lives and public events in three countries, India, England and Bangladesh. As in his first novel _The Circle of Reason_ (1986) the interest and focus is on storytelling, Coil within coil of memories unfurl in the narrator’s story. However, the novel never becomes too subjective or esoteric. Amitav Ghosh with his subtle sense of humour and awareness of contemporary politics ensures that private turmoil and crises are mirrored in public turmoil and crises.”¹⁶

Thus, _The Shadow Lines_ imbibes the themes of feminism, and nationalism while making use of unique narrative technique based on memory. But the novel stands out for the introduction of Ghosh’s favourite concern and a revolutionary one too, of the futility of borders and divisions and emphasis on the need to dissolve these physical boundaries. Only such an effort can obliterate psychological barriers and bring the world closer. Whereas _The Circle of Reason_, a fantastic novel in its own right adopts its style from Salman Rushdie’s _magic realism_, _The Shadow
*Lines* is a true reflection of Ghosh’s genius and is his universally acknowledged masterpiece till date.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


*All the subsequent references are from the same edition hereafter referred to with page number in parentheses within the chapter itself.


