

## Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow of Lines*: A Critical Study

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The *Shadow Lines* would be a remarkable novel by any standards. Indeed many facile adjectives such as 'cerebral', 'unputdownable' and 'well-wrought' spring to mind. For sheer craft and compelling story-telling, few recently produced 'Indian' novels touch it. With nothing identifiably 'Indian' details of time and place and history, the nationality successfully joins an order of world fiction. Louis James comments on the artistic and thematic quality of *The Shadow Lines*:

Ghosh's novel introduces a family "tree," but it is not the legally-defined family of European society, of Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga* or Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*—rather it is the Asian extended family of loyalties, affections and associations. This becomes so complex that even the narrator confesses confusion and the novel is to some extent about the meaning of family relationships in a disintegrating world. (Louis James, 1999, p. 56.)

The narrative of *The Shadow Lines* skims or pauses over a crowded tapestry of the past spanning of years from 1939 to 1979. The novel begins when the first person narrator, who is never named, is about eight years old, living in Calcutta, India admiring Tridib, his intellectual uncle, who is about twenty-nine. Certainly it records with vividness the inner life of the growing child, but Tridib, who shapes the narrator's youthful personality and Ila, his beautiful cousin who almost defeats it, could really be called the most important people in the novel. We summarize the novel in the words of Robert Dixon:

The narrator's family are Hindus who fled from their home in Dhaka to Calcutta after the formation of East Pakistan. There, during the Second World War, when Europe itself lies in ruins, they befriend an English family, the Prices and the two families are woven together by a complex series of cultural crossings. Mrs. Price's father, Lionel Tresawson, lived in India before Independence, and is a type of the travelling Englishman, having left his home in Cornwall to travel widely in the Empire: in Malaysia, Fiji, Ceylon and finally Calcutta. The narrator's uncle, Tridib, went to London and lived with the Prices during the war. . . . He is writing shortly after his return to Calcutta from England, where he too becomes involved with the Prices. . . for in the narrator's recollections 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. (Robert Dixon, 1996, pp. 10-11.)

So far, Amitav Ghosh writes about the narrator's family and the Prices before India's Independence. He goes on to write the latter half thus:

The second part of the novel climaxes in the narrator's return visit to the family home in Dhaka in 1964 with but this homecoming abounds with ironies. His grandmother wants to bring her uncle back from Pakistan, the land of their Muslim enemies, to her home in Calcutta—but Pakistan is her real home, the goal of her ritual homecoming. She is nostalgic for the "classical" conception of cultures. She believes that her children should not be mixing with English people, and is particularly critical of the narrator's cousin Ila for living in England. . . . But when the grandmother looks down from the plane as they pass from India into Pakistan in 1964, she is surprised that there is no visible border on the ground. . . . The elderly relative in Dhaka delivers the final blow to her view of the world when he refuses to go back to Calcutta, even denying its existence in reality. . . . (Ibid., pp. 10-11)

The post-Independence Indian Indo-English woman writers, like their counterparts in the Western world, have chosen to overthrow the concept of woman as "Vedias Dasi." Kamala

Das, for example, presents in her works resistant women characters who exploit their sexuality in their bid for advancement, thereby reversing the Hindu idealization of women generally and the nationalistic discursive construct of a benevolent and protective Mother India specifically. Kamala Das's Manasi in *Alphabet of Lus* is the antithesis of the chaste, Sita-like Brahminic feminine ideal which informed the Indian independence struggle.

Ila, in *The Shadow Lines*, is not a "Vedic Dasi" and, therefore, she castigates Indian culture for prohibiting her dance with an anonymous businessman. Ila is Manasi of Kamala Das and Namjoshi's personhood. All three represent the voice of feminism in the India of the eighties of the last century.

The English racism rears its head in the *Shadow Lines*. She is being beaten up by the English racists, like the beating of Srinivas in Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man*. Like Srinivas Ila does not return to India. She, subsequently, did her BA in History at the University College in London, took up a job in an office and married Nick Price whom she had known for years.

As to the dislike of Ila by Tha'mma' and the former's unfitness to be a resident of England, Tha'mma' judgement of Ila is wrong. The grandmother lived a period of terrorist movement of Bengal. Her desire was to live a free life. Therefore, the desire of Ila to live in London, rootless, free of middle class constraints and taboos was disliked by the grandmother. Ila also has radical friends in London, who I picket on political issues. Dan the Trotskyite who wrote anti- Nazi pamphlets and Tresawsen who edited a left wing newsletter. Like the grandmother's nationalism, Nick Price's nationalism has a face. Nick Price gave up a lucrative chartered accountant's job in Kuwait because of outdated management practices and interfering Arab business partners. He still clings to Britain's colonial past.

The pathos of a child's search for a space of her own is brought out by Amitav Ghosh through Ila. Only an indivisible line, a shadow line divides real and imagined space, but a child is unable to perceive it. Unfortunately, in Ila, this distressfully inadequate vision does not change even when the child attains adulthood, which we have discussed earlier.

Therefore, the quest of Ila for personal freedom in London is fully justified. She retains her ideas, values, belongingness, radicalism, and love. India proved to be claustrophobic for a New Woman in Ila.

The journey in *The Shadow Lines* is of two types: real and imagined. In the latter, we take the examples of Tridib and the narrator. Tridib pointed out places in the Bartholomew's Atlas while telling him stories-"Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with"(The *Shadow Lines*, p. 20.)-so that long before he actually moved out of Calcutta, his world had expanded to include many parts of the globe through learning and hearing and reading about these places. Cairo, Madrid, Cuzco or Colombo, names that his globe-trotting cousin Ila mentioned casually, were for the narrator "a set of magical talismans"(The *Shadow Lines*, p. 20.) to be invested with reality through precise imagination in the way Tridib had taught him, though he knew he could never replicate the same feat: "And still I knew that the sights Tridib saw in his imagination were infinitely more detailed, more precise than anything I would ever see."(The *Shadow Lines*, p. 29). Tridib had told him of the desire that can carry 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 the mirror."(The *Shadow Lines*, p. 29). Ila lived in the present, in the external world of Journeys. Tridib lived in the internal world of journeys.

Once again we talk of "Going Away" and "Coming Home." Tridib goes away from India to England with his family and the child relives the experience vicariously through Tridib's imaginatively vivid descriptions, so that when he himself grows up and goes to London, it is an effortless transition, a "coming" rather than a "going." Long before the narrator

left home he knew the A to Z map of London so well-that the first time he came to London he could lead Nick and Ila confidently along the roads of West Hampstead as if he had lived there himself.

As mentioned earlier, the imagined world of Tridib helps the narrator to make a mental journey of different parts of this world. "Tridib was an archaeologist, he was not interested in fairylands: the one thing he wanted to teach me, he used to say, was to use my imagination with precision." (The Shadow Lines, p. 24.) 'The viewer's exercise of memory and imagination enables him to 'see' in the mind's eye, more vividly than in actuality.' (Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, p. 288.)

The actual physical journey of the grandmother is the theme of "Coming Home." The narrator in The Shadow Lines has a history: the pattern of dwelling in travel. Ghosh subverts what Sara Suleri has called "The Rhetoric of English India". (Sara Suleri, 1992, p. 26.)

The opening sentence of the novel immediately unsettles the rhetoric: "In 1939, thirteen years before I was father's aunt, Mayadebi, went to England with her husband and her son, Tridib." (The Shadow Lines, p. 3.)

The journey of grandmother to Tresawsein London in 1939 was a memorable event, etched in the mind of Tridib, and, subsequently it helps to narrator to say: "Nobody can ever know what it was like to be young and intelligent in the summer of 1939 in London or Berline." (The Shadow Lines, p. 152.)

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 neighbourhood of Calcutta with his elderly grandmother.

In the second part of the novel, the grandmother's Journey to Dhaka becomes a symbolic search for a point of fixity. Born in Dhaka, separated from her birthplace by a history of bloodshed and lines on a map, Tha'mma loses her grammatical co-ordinates as she thinks of 'home'. She is to distinguish between "going", "coming" and 'Tha'mma, Tha'mma I cried. How could you have 'come' home to Dhaka? You don't know the difference between coming and going" (The Shadow Lines, P.152)

The "climax" occurs as the grandmother and her sister are returning in their Mercedes from their ancestral home and their uncle is following them in the rickshaw (Rabi's narrative 243-47, May Price's recollection 250-51). When they come to the hazar area, they find that the shops are closed and the street is deserted, but for stray people it was as if they were waiting for the car: In no time a lot of men surround the car, break the windscreen and the driver suffers a cut across his face. The car lurches and comes to a halt with its front wheel in a gutter. Then the security guard jumps out and fires a shot from his revolver and the crowd begins to withdraw from the car. At the same time the eerie silence is broken by a check, and the attention of the crowd turns to the sound of a rickshaw-Khalil's rickshaw-with their uncle in it, and the people surrounded the rickshaw. Though the sisters could have driven away, May Price and Tridib leave the car to save the old man and they get lost in the whirligig of the crowd. The mischief takes less than a moment and the crowd begins to melt away. The dead bodies of Khalil, the old man and Tridib lie on the road.

This death of Khalil, Tridib, and the Jethamoshai at the hands of a Dhaka mob confirms in her a pathological hatred of 'them'. In 1965, as soon as the war starts, she gifts her only gold chain to the war fund: "For your sake; for your freedom; she tells her grandson, 'We have to kill them before they kill us; we have to wipe them out'." (The Shadow Lines, p. 237) Hysterical from the memory of the rioters who killed Tridib, she takes comfort in the organized propriety of war: "We are fighting them properly at last," she says "with tanks and guns and bombs." (The Shadow Lines, p. 237) The migrancy and consequent 'blindness' to and alienation

from the world, her violent intervention in human affairs, all are represented in the novel in negative terms.

Throughout her visit to Dacca, Tha'mma's search for the preparation Dhaka of her childhood and youth is projected as a nostalgic return home. Despite her naturalisation as an Indian citizen, her strong loyalties and affiliations to the city of her birth, which surface during her journey to Dhaka, permit Ghosh to investigate the conflicting claims of roots and belonging, national and boundaries in the Indian mind. Tha'mma's attempt to identify herself as a native Dhakaian from the older parts of the city, who is contemptuous of the alien inhabitants of new residential localities, demonstrates her amnesia to her new Indian identity when confronted with the more compelling claims of an older solidarity. Tha'mma's visit to her parental home, ironically figured as a married daughter's "going home as a widow" (The Shadow Lines, p. 205)-where she emotionally declares to her estranged uncle, "We've come home at last"(The Shadow Lines, p. 212)-is used to explore the contradiction of local and national identities further.

The delayed account of Tridib's death serves the purpose of providing a detailed account into the meaning of essential nationalism and underline the need for "transcending the ways in which meanings get fixed, locked in moments of history which time nor social change, nor personal affiliation can alter."(Abena Busia, 1993, p. 13.)

Ghosh argues that only an awareness of the 'invented' nature of communities can release individuals from the manipulations of political imaginings. Tha'mma remains imprisoned in the myth of nation until the end. Her response to Tridib's death, donating her last few pieces of jewellery to the war fund, shows steeped she is in nationalist rhetoric.

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