

Amitav Ghosh' *Shadow Lines*: Mapping Cross Border Identity

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Abstract

The Shadow Lines (1988) is a historical novel by Amitav Ghosh that focuses on the national and geographical boundaries that alienate individuals. The book also depicts the violence that erupted in 1964. The title “The Shadow Lines” has multiple layers of meanings; it does not only relate to international boundaries. Ghosh’s choice of the title implies that the boundaries that divide people are just ‘shadows’. Those borders are nothing but artificial and fictitious lines drawn by people from power centre. Ghosh emphasises arbitrary nature of such geographic demarcations. This paper tends to identify the identity of people who did cross geographical borders forcefully or voluntarily and how memory and nostalgia loom large upon them.

Keywords- Partition, Border, Migration, Identity, Memory

In his masterpiece *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh manoeuvres an anonymous narrator to recall interwoven memories of three generations: Tridib, Robi, and Ila and their parents; the narrator, his parents, and grandmother; Mrs Price and her son Nick and daughter May; and the narrator, his parents, and grandmother Mayadebi. Although it spans three generations and three families, the narrator's story is undeniably his own narration: a memory from 1939, 13 years before he was born, to 15 years after the events of 1964. It is about what he has strived to remember in order to get a better understanding, or a clearer image of Tridib’s murder, who has a particular place in the narrator’s life since Tridib’s method of encoding and decoding has shaped the narrator’s way of consuming and creating to some extent.

Ghosh had to defy Sara Suleri’s so-called “the English Rhetoric of India” since the conventional Anglo-Indian fiction was aimed at reinforcing the traditional idea of distinct cultures in composing *The Shadow Lines*. The introductory sentence of the book instantly disturbs the rhetoric: “In 1939, thirteen years before I was born, my father's aunt, Mayadebi, went to England with her husband and her son, Tridib” (Ghosh, 1). *The Shadow Lines* starts with an Indian’s voyage to England, contrary to the typical colonial fiction, in which Westerners go to India to study an ancient independent culture. The fundamental reality of travelling in the experience of an Indian family immediately requires us to change our assumptions of culture of India and how it is represented in English novels. Furthermore, in 1939, when Britain declared war on Germany, these Indians move

overseas. Classical ethnography believes that Western observers' culture is a stable and consistent position from which indigenous society may be observed. Ghosh undermines this concept by portraying Britain in conflict with Germany so that division occurs behind the scenes of an equally unstable Europe. The analogies between Britain and Germany, India and Pakistan effectively undercut the division between East and West, colonies and metropolises, and point to likeness and continuous contrasts that divide them.

The bipartite structure of *The Shadow Lines*, refers to Joseph Conrad's *The Shadow Line* (1917), one of the colonial texts. Conrad argues in the introduction to this novella that the invisible line separates young people from adulthood. The protagonist of the novella, a novice naval officer, was ordered to return the ship to London with his first command in south-east Asia. In harsh conditions, he goes from Orient to West and succeeds in passing the shadow line into adulthood, which is overlaid on the conflict between Europe and Orient in complicated ways. In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh splits this book into two sections by "Going Away" and "Coming Home", and challenges such mapping of the globe to the East and West. The irony is that his characters travel so many different ways. The narrator has to ask himself what is home and is there anything such as a discreet hometown that can be separated from his experience elsewhere.

The second half of the book culminates with the 1964 return visit of the narrator to family house in Dhaka. However, this house is complete with irony. His grandmother wishes her uncle to return from Pakistan, to her house in Calcutta. But Pakistan is her actual home, the objective of her ritual homecoming. It is wistful about the classical understanding of cultures. She thinks that her children should not mingle with English people and criticizes Ila, narrator's cousin, in particular: "Ila has no right to live there. It took those people a long time to build that country; ... They know they're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood.... That's what it takes to make a country" (Ghosh, 82).

Nevertheless, as narrator's grandmother looks down from the aircraft as she passed from India into Pakistan in 1964, she was shocked that there was no apparent boundary on the ground, asking, "But 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, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us" (Ghosh, 167).

The utter worthlessness of boundaries is shown through Thamma. When she wants to know from her son, how she can identify whether she is entering a new country, she has trouble grasping the concept that the line is not on the border but rather within the airport. She cannot accept there are not any exterior markers or trenches to indicate the Calcutta-Dhaka boundary. She is also bothered by the fact that she must go through many processes to travel between the two nations.

Geographical demarcations and borders, according to Ghosh, are arbitrary in nature and create barriers between countries and people of those countries. When Thamma's uncle, Jethamoshai, is persuaded to join his extended family in Calcutta, he tells her, "I don't believe in this India-Shindia.... Suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? No one will have you anywhere. As for me, I was t born here, and I'll die here" (Ghosh, 237). Jethamoshai's statement demonstrates the futility of boundary lines since he has faith in the rootedness of countries. He doubts the capacity of these national boundaries to separate individuals because he knows that once a person begins to move, there is no stopping him. The narrator sees the folly of politicians' continuous line-drawing since it does not separate anything or anybody but rather

encourages violence on both sides of the border. When he says that these boundary lines that divide nations on geographical maps are worthless, he expresses his personal view regarding their ineffectiveness:

They had drawn their borders, believing in that pattern, in the enchantment of the 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.... The simple fact 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 1, 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. (Ghosh, 257)

The narrator claims that boundary lines on political maps, drawn by the politicians, do not imply they split the country into two. Instead, he becomes entangled in the “symmetry” that ties him to Dhaka even more tightly than when Calcutta and Dhaka were united in British India. He utilizes a “looking-glass” metaphor to imply that Calcutta and Dhaka are linked to each other like reflections in a mirror. Tridib, the narrator’s uncle, thinks that the boundaries established by politicians are nothing more than shadows, and Ghosh exposes this subject of absurdity of borders via him. These boundaries will never divide people that share the common history and culture. People are divided by riots and the causes that contribute to them, according to him. These boundary lines may seem to separate individuals, yet they bring them closer together since their memories are unbroken.

Ghosh symbolically recounts the tale of the partition of ancestral home of narrator’s grandmother in Dhaka as part of his study of these “shadow lines”. When Thamma’a was still a child, this house began to be divided. A wooden partition wall that runs through the doors has been used to separate the home. The two halves of the family agreed to divide the home to put an end to their constant bickering. Ironically, they were unable to achieve the serenity they sought, and instead, the home was divided, causing animosity between the two families. Ghosh employs this metaphor of the home partition to symbolize the nation’s political division.

Maps and cartography are another significant topics in this novel. The whole story revolves around past incidents of bloodshed caused by demarcation of border, maps, and cartography. In imperialism, political maps have much influence; they may be seen as a means for colonizers to assert supremacy over the colonized. Said defines imperialism as “an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted and finally brought under control” (Said, 14) in *Culture and Imperialism*. The colonizer oppresses the colonized via these maps, and the colonized is subjugated. According to Said, maps are “weapons of imperialism” that are exploited to promote colonialism. Ghosh stresses the opacity of borders and limits while simultaneously emphasizing the futility of maps. Tridib’s old Atlas is discovered by the narrator when he comes back from London after fifteen years of Tridib’s death. The narrator begins to construct an imagined circle on the globe and finds that Chang-Mai, Thailand, is considerably closer to Calcutta than Delhi, while Chengdu, China, is much closer to Srinagar. This also explains the notion that the boundaries and the circles drawn on the map by the narrator are both fictitious and simply shadows.

Therefore, *The Shadow Lines* is a fictional criticism of the distinct cultural patterns of classical anthropology and the related ideology of nationalism. The reality is a complicated network of international and generational connections. The narrator praises nationalism as “that indivisible sanity that binds people to each other independently of their governments” (p. 231). The narrator looks at

Tridib's old map after his visit to Pakistan, measures the distances across countries with the help of a compass and thinks on the disconnection between memory, human experience, and national borders. He recognizes that the space of Euclidean atlas has nothing to do with cultural and cognitive space:

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 the prehistoric Gondwanaland. What had they felt, I wondered, when they discovered that there had never been a moment in the 4000-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. (Ghosh, 233-4)

The wonderful recollections of Dhaka and Calcutta are well portrayed by the characters who look forward to their homelands, in *The Shadow Lines*. Bengal's partition and the resulting anguish are extensively delineated. This partition has caused enormous disruption and displacement in Pakistan and India. Displacement of migrants is one of the central themes. While divided into lines, these lines only exist as shadow lines, obliterated by previous memory, yearning, and nostalgia. Memory and longing for home are a recurrent backdrop in this book, and two types of dislocation, namely forced migration and voluntary migration, may be seen in this novel. The first was because of the partition of Bengal, next was owing to the skilled Indian workforce. Ghosh shows brilliantly how shadows of imagined and remembered places haunt most of the characters of the novel as they tell one another about their collective history. The shadow lines allude to the grey areas of memory and imagination. According to Urabashi Barat,

The *Shadow Lines* is of course one that quite obviously conforms to the bildungsroman pattern of beginning in the childhood of the narrator-protagonist and ending in his attaining adulthood and maturity. Each stage of his development is clearly demarcated through the change of location demanded of the bildungsroman. (Barat, 21)

The Shadow Lines also shows, wonderfully, how the narrator stands out as an adult deeply entrenched in his childhood memories. The way he confronts his current reflects on his history. His experiences and responses come from his infancy. Tridib tells about his early experiences in London, and helps in recollecting memory, naturally. Due to the deeply established connection and yearning, the depth of its history could always be seen in the present. Memory is the primary motive interwoven throughout *The Shadow Lines*. This is due to quest for root and nostalgia. The intensity of how one communicates his previous experiences with others is assessed by every individual's memory. The recollections of Tridib in quality and intensity much surpass those of Ila in this novel. Even after partition, it continues to be a real home for the grandmother, and she constantly wants to revisit it. Her visit to Dhaka reflects her longing for the past in Dhaka.

The Shadow Lines portrays vivid sense of alienation. The past is rebuilt through pictures, maps and newspapers. The narrator recalls a couple of incidents- the first when he, accompanied by his grandmother and Tridib to bring her uncle, Jethamoshai, from Dhaka to Calcutta, was a witness to Tridib's death, due to communal violence. Secondly, he remembers when he met May when the narrator visited London. There has been a tumultuous manner of remembering events from 1939–1940, 1960–1963 and 1978–1979. These distorted geographical and temporal pieces influence the post-colonial circumstances and the cultural dislocations in a cohesive way.

The immigrants begin to feel rootless as they encounter the new cultural paradigm. They start developing a new nostalgic pattern in which they feel a strong desire for their respective root. Ghosh provides numerous examples of such memory from afar in his literature. Whilst relying on examples

of this nostalgic complexity, he tries to show that these past memories are a remedy for the current sufferings. Home thinking is produced exclusively in immigrants who refuse to get acculturated in the current cultural backdrop.

After a lot of discussions, the conclusion emerges that Amitav Ghosh is a writer of border crossing. *The Shadow Lines* is a complete package of cross-border situations. The imaginary borderline that separates the two countries is just like a shadow line. Many individuals have had a conundrum because of this shadow line on the maps or the globe. Whenever such a line is established, it is in the victims' psyche that the traumatic scenario arises. When such a new line is developed, a significant dilemma is evolved too. *The Shadow Lines* demonstrates the difficult conditions and crises that human identity are facing.

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