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'Going Away' and 'Coming Home': *The Shadow Lines* and the Travel Motif in Children's Fiction

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Ruskin Bond's children's story, 'The Great Train Journey,' the title of which suggests the celebration of a travel experience, is paradoxically not about the young hero travelling by train through quaint and exotic places at all.[1] By showing the schoolboy protagonist Suraj to be harbouring the illusion that he has run away from home till such time as he realizes, with a mixture of shock and disappointment, that he had been on a circular goods train which has traced its way back to the very station from which it started, the end of the story leaves Suraj perplexed about whether he 'went away' or 'came home.' The story is an example in which the distinction between coming and going is blurred to the extent that one does not know one from the other.

The two key phrases 'going away' and 'coming home,' used in the *The Shadow Lines* to separate the two parts of the novel, with an ostensible agenda of structuring it, describe the trajectory usually followed by fiction for children of the school going age-group. In these stories the child rebel/adventurer/traveller/dreamer makes a journey away from home, regales the reader with incredible experiences in unfamiliar situations and remote places, but ultimately returns to the protective fold and the *status quo* of his home. The intermediary experiences are usually an attempt to escape the stifling regimentation and sham

morality of his/her home or school environment. What happens to Suraj usually happens to the other child protagonists, except that they voluntarily come back after a brush with the outside world, which makes them aware of its insecurities and hazards, as well as the relative comforts of the homes they have left behind.

In *The Shadow Lines*, however, the paradigm of 'going away' and 'coming home' is worked out at a much more complex level than in children's fiction, and that is what marks its departure from the genre of children's literature or travel and adventure stories. Using 'going away' and 'coming home' as basic props on which a narrative edifice of intertwining human relationships (and their accompanying exchange of ideas) during a critical period in history is constructed — is a strategy that makes it an adult novel. Such a strategy deconstructs the very assumptions of the travel motif in children's fiction and divides the story neatly into 'escaping from home' and 'coming back to reality.' In fact, the seeming polarization of the two words 'come' and 'go,' verbs that literally mean the opposite of each other, is one of the major 'shadow lines' that is sought to be demolished in the process of the unfolding of the narrator's experiences. It results in an ironic destabilization of the very principles on which the two-fold structure of the novel apparently rests.

In this essay, I am going to try and examine the use of the two catch phrases 'going away' and 'coming home' to see if they help to highlight some aspects of Bengali children's fiction, with the sole purpose of trying to find out some obvious and not so obvious differences that go on to make *The Shadow Lines* much more than a children's travel story, an adult novel.

I

The first question that we can ask with regard to the novel is about its genre. As a bildungsroman, the narrator's story from innocence to experience and from childhood to adulthood is articulated through both his real and his vicarious experiences, ranging from those heard from Tridib and Tha'mma to those actually lived with Ila, Nick and May. It is the kind of Bakhtinian

'novel of emergence' in which 'man's individual emergence is inseparably linked to historical emergence [...] on the border between two epochs.'[2] It is also an inverse variation of another kind of Bakhtinian 'novel of emergence' that 'traces a typically repeating path of man's emergence from youthful idealism and fantasies to mature sobriety and practicality.' It is towards the end of his fictional journey that the narrator wishfully reverts to a kind of childlike innocence in a romantic idealization of a world without 'shadow lines.' Bakhtin takes into account the complications that arise on the way due to varying degrees of skepticism and resignation, which the narrator of *The Shadow Lines* also feels at every phase of his growth. But in the wishing away of 'shadow lines' of various kinds in this process, and in attributing some value to the great 'sacrifice' performed by Tridib as a message of co-existence and harmony among human beings, the narrator displays his inability to accept the brute facts of 'growing up' or 'experience.' His behavior amply demonstrates that he would rather cling on to an unfeasible, utopian vision of a world, which is not irrationally, unjustly, and cruelly divided into fragments. The journey, therefore, is not just from innocence to experience, but also back to a sentient, sensible and sensitive 'innocence' that expresses itself fully only when the narrator has crossed childhood and adolescence, and is on the threshold of adulthood. The novel, therefore, also problematises an easy demarcation between 'innocence' and 'experience,' faith and cynicism, or rebellion and resignation, that is so central to the conventional bildungsroman.

The novel, at another level, is a take-off on Bengali travel literature. As Meenakshi Mukherjee says, 'real journeys within the country and imagined travels to far away places outside national boundaries have always fascinated the Bengali middle-class.'[3] However, despite the cartographic details in the novel and the names of outlandish places on the globe with their accompanying unusual experiences, much of the 'travel' of the narrator is not just about 'going away' to England. It also displays the ability to be vicariously transported to various times and places merely by listening spellbound to stories by Tridib and others, and virtually appropriating those experiences as his own.

The use of the recurring mirror image in the novel, bringing into focus two people who are similar, or explaining situations that reflect each other, is an artifice that aids the narrator to acquire the moratoria prerogative of being in other people's *shoes*, at many places and times simultaneously. The metaphor of the mirror is deployed throughout the novel to accentuate the likeness between two people, events or even nations that reflect each other by using what would, according to common sense, be considered inadequate criteria of comparison. The narrator, for example, always thinks of Nick as his mirror image, although Nick is fairer and taller than him, probably because he senses that they are both attracted to Ila.

'Going' and 'coming' can also be seen as mirror images, although the two are far from identical, for a mirror image portrays reality, but is also at the same time away from reality. 'Going away,' therefore, in this novel, is a take-off from reality, which imaginatively turns to Tridib, Robi, May or even Nick and Ila — despite their cold-blooded pragmatism. 'Going away' describes people and events in England, or simply allows the narrator to imaginatively recreate people, places and events; while 'coming home' turns to Tha'mma or May, or some kind of introspective reasoning, whether it is in Calcutta or London.

Travelling, therefore, is not just between two geographical locations or two points in history, but is the ability to shift from experience to experience, both in terms of time and space — imaginatively erasing the 'shadow lines' between two people's experiences in disparate geographical contexts and at discrete historical junctures, and at times trespassing into the formidable or forbidden domain of people who are slotted higher or lower in the hierarchy of class or race. While doing this, it sometimes becomes equally necessary to jump the border between real and imaginary experience, as borne out by the scene in which the narrator and Ila play 'house' and give away many of their real and gut emotions of love, hate, fear and persecution. In the process, the very confusion in the meanings of the words 'come' and 'go' that the narrator always teases his Tha'mma about, becomes for him an equivocation that he not only enjoys playing around with, but also has to negotiate and come to terms with

in the course of his own experiences. Given his kind of temperament that finds it difficult to accept the lines between most man-made differences, it is he who understands and sympathises most with the mystification of the two words used by his Tha'mma.

In traditional Bengali households, there is something inauspicious about saying, 'I take your leave' or 'I will go now,' when one actually means to depart for any destination, because it could mean that he/she might never come back. When one is going away, therefore, one is expected to say *Aashi*, which literally means its opposite, that is 'I am just coming,' its nearest English equivalent as a farewell statement would be 'See you soon' or 'Until we meet again.'

The interchangeable meanings of 'come' and 'go' are attributed initially to Tha'mma because of a change in national identity, subsequent to the partition. Brought up on the ambivalent connotation of the words 'come' and 'go,' it is not surprising that Tha'mma clings on to and internalizes this prevarication to suit her needs. Having lost her home in the aftermath of the partition, she cannot complacently accept or adjust to the new 'home' in Calcutta, to which she must now 'come' rather than 'go.' She is equally outraged at having to 'go' to Dhaka, which is her real home, when she visits her sister. She feels far more at ease with herself to say that she will 'come' to Dhaka and 'go' to her home in Calcutta. As I have said already, the point is reiterated in the narrator's private jokes about 'coming' and 'going' with his Tha'mma.

The novel takes up as its ideological agenda the critique of such a nationalism that leaves one bewildered about whether one 'comes' or 'goes' to one's own home. And in doing so, it experiments with the narrative technique, doing away with a chronological sequence of events, also collapsing the categories of the 'past' and the 'present.' Both in its content and form, therefore, the novel is preoccupied with qualifying absolute ideas of space and time. In this sense, travel becomes a trope for passing through space or time into situations outside oneself and one's social place and national identity, ruthlessly dispensing with all kinds of 'shadow lines' in the process. Travel is also not

linear, but cyclical, enriched by repetitions and meaningful resonances of details from other times and places.

II

The narrator 'goes away' or lets himself go with the help of his uncle Tridib, an archetypal figure of inspiration in children's fiction, who leads the child through a maze of insightful stories that cannot be judged by normal middle-class common sense. Such alternate mentors appeal to children much more than parents or teachers, and perhaps for that very reason, are usually presented with and tempered by a word of caution from fictional parents and teachers, or sometimes the author. Bengali children's fiction is replete with instances of the child protagonist's undiluted adulation for such eccentric and unconventional uncles or cousins, who, despite their *Bhadralok* backgrounds, do not follow the dictates of genteel decorum, discretion and discipline. Over and over again, the child protagonist associates and identifies more with such non-conformist uncles than with stuffy and self-righteous parents, limited by their *Bhadralok* preoccupation with rules and regulations, academic success and worldly wisdom, and by their anxiety as not to violate the norms of respectability and decency.

The novel follows the stereotypical trajectory of a lot of children's stories written in Bengali, which are about the child protagonist's refusal to adjust and be complacent within a system in which he/she sees himself/herself as trapped. In such stories, a sporadic and unsystematic though valid critique of the system emerges from a reading of the discontent expressed by the child character. Often, the child protagonist experiments with outlets and fantasies from the established order of his/her home and school, escaping with the help of an external human agency in the form of an uncle, a cousin, a domestic servant or a street acquaintance who is also a magician or a performer. Yet the modes of escape offered by these tempters who inspire the child to an alternate way of life contain within them something illusory or hazardous. Despite the child's refusal to be restricted within the parameters of established norms, there is a simultaneous and anomalous inability to break free of it. The

adult perspective of most of these stories sees any kind of childhood rebellion as potentially dangerous, and therefore does not permit it beyond a certain limit. The most radical implications of the child's critique of the establishment, therefore, are ultimately contained and reassimilated within the middle-class worldview of such fiction. The oft-repeated configuration, therefore, is of the child getting into a scrape which not only opens out new possibilities for him/her, but also shows a dormant desire in him/her to challenge the assumptions of his/her family and society in order to be a part of the 'other,' and a cautiously presented fictional 'loop,' whereby the child has to ultimately return to the fold. The adventurer returns, the dreamer awakens, or the truant traces his way back to home or school.

Returning to *The Shadow Lines*, the relationship between the narrator and Tridib is a standard, fictional one between a growing boy and a larger-than-life person who opted out of the mainstream, yet whose intuitive, unsophisticated response to the world around attracts the narrator to him. It is this character that he hero-worships and tries to identify with and it makes the novel a complex variation of children's fiction. In children's fiction, such persons are represented as follows:

> The general out-group, the people to be avoided…the adults whose candy must not be accepted. In their anxiety to build a shield against harm into their children's minds and to bind their children to themselves and their own kind, parents project many fantasies of evil into these 'strangers.'[4]

In Bengali children's fiction, the servants Jhagru and Phagu in Lila Majumdar's short stories, and the street-side juggler Haarunda in Satyajit Ray's *Phatikchand* are just two examples among many of such peripheral characters that capture the imagination of the children. Such characters are, in spite of and perhaps because of their unconventional ways, role models for the child protagonists, even if they have no claim or say in the matters of the more privileged families to which the children belong. Among fictional uncles who entice the children away from the complacent insularity of their parents and homes, a typical case is that of the *Chotomaama* in Lila Majumdar's Gupi

and Paanu stories. *Chotomaama*, who has dropped out of college but is supposedly building a rocket to go to the moon, holds the children's interest by his experiences and his experiments, because they are so far removed from the reality of the children's lives that they stir their imagination into a possible escape from the drudgery of home and school. A vicarious participation in *Chotomaama*'s offbeat ventures even allows Paanu, a disabled boy, to create an imaginary world in which he can transcend the limitations of his own physical handicap for some time. Sanjib Chattopadhyay's *Baromaama* also has in common with all such uncles, an expansive imagination, and the ability to make the fictional nephew an accomplice, willingly or otherwise, in all his weird enterprises, which opens out a world of fun bringing on disaster for him. The *Kaakababu* stories of Sunil Gangapadhyay, about the detective hero *Kaakababu* with his nephew Santu as assistant, and *the Feluda* stories of Satyajit Ray, with Feluda and Topshe working likewise as a team of a detective and a collaborator, introduce an uncle/cousin in yet another sub-genre within children's fiction. This genre is of mystery or adventure stories, in which the uncle/cousin similarly lures the child away to picturesque, exciting but perilous locales where they solve criminal cases together.

Like Tridib, they are also repositories of all kinds of knowledge, which fascinates and attracts the child towards them all the more. Being serials, the stories necessitate a return of the child character to the humdrum reality of his quotidian existence before the next adventure begins. But it is, by and large, also true of other stories in which the ubiquitous uncle plays a major role in opening up an unknown world and tempting the child protagonist to transgress his/her monotonous routine. In Satyajit Ray's '*Atithi*' (later filmed as *Aagantuk)*, the child's has a great rapport with an elderly great-uncle who is a dropout, a freak, a Bohemian and refreshingly different from his smug, professionally successful father and his conventional housewife mother. This demonstrates that the child protagonist, over and over again, is enthralled by the exploits of such eccentric uncles, and temporarily enjoys their friendship over the relationship they have with their run-of-the-mill parents.

Tridib, like many of his counterparts in children's stories, is a virtual dropout from the system. He lives on its periphery. Unlike his two brothers who are professionally successful and study abroad or get foreign postings in their jobs, he does not work for a living, and is not averse to spending his adult life in a shanty room on the terrace of his ancestral home. The alternative that he offers the narrator of a normal, middle-class, straitjacketed and 'decent' response to the world around him is on the basis of his rich accumulation of stories from real life as well as his knowledge of archaeology, geography and history. He opens out an imaginary space for the narrator that not only heightens his awareness of the world, but also gives him unusual though valid perceptions about things. Tridib, says the narrator, 'has given me worlds to travel in, and eyes to see them with' (20). The narrator first experiences the world through Tridib's eyes and then through first-hand experiences in and around the places and times in which Tridib lived. When he is in England, for instance, he reconstructs Tridib's encounters by going about the city like a live map, prioritising the places that were important to Tridib over other, lesser areas that were not in his scheme of things. The narrator undertakes imaginative and real forays into unknown places, spearheaded by the live Tridib and attributed to his memory when he is dead. It is these experiences and views, which constitute much of the 'travel' in the novel. They cannot be evaluated by the standards of normal intelligence or middle-class common sense that the narrator has been brought up on.

Since *The Shadow Lines* is not a children's novel, the prototype of the tempter-uncle is not absorbed back into the system to accommodate a 'happy ending,' that conveniently suppresses the questions raised in the course of the novel. In Lila Majumdar's *Gupi and Paanu Stories*, for instance, the *Chotomaama* is made to return to college to study for his B.A. degree before being allowed to engage in any more amateur sleuth-like enterprises, with Gupi and Paanu as accomplices. In Satyajit Ray's '*Atithi*' and *Phatikchand*, these stock characters are weeded out and made to go their way alone, to make smooth the return of the prodigal child to his own accepted milieu.

Although 'the tempter-uncle' in this novel actually dies, he not only leaves the narrator to cope with the world alone (a world that did not understand the former), but also continues to haunt and torment the memory and conscience of his nephew, and Robi and May with many unanswered questions. Ironically, therefore, it is in this adult novel that there is some 'future' for the dead uncle who had instigated and provoked the child to overstep the restricted milieu of his family and social class, giving him something much more valuable than asking him to pass examinations and be successful in worldly terms.

III

One such intellectual legacy inherited by the narrator from Tridib is his persistent questioning of everything around him, from trivial family assumptions to political decisions and philosophical ideas. Somewhere between the simultaneous experiences of 'going' and 'coming,' the narrator primarily interrogates the 'lines' that his world is made up of — the demarcations between so many areas of human experience and understanding, which he construes as illusions.[5] This perceptiveness helps him in negotiating a world full of artificial barriers between times and places, between people and their classes, and lines between innocence and experience and reality and imagination.

That the narrator would like to live in such a world where there are no man-made boundaries, no bloodshed and violence, is obvious. He is amazed to see that an incident in Srinagar, across the national border, should have stirred such a hornet's nest in distant Khulna, but the adjoining areas remained unaffected. Any atlas could inspire him to work out these equations for himself, but it is poignantly significant that an atlas, which he has inherited from Tridib, should do so.

In geo-political terms, the demarcation between India and Pakistan, leading to a reordering of the distinction between 'coming' and 'going,' is thin for the most affected victim of the partition in the novel, namely, Tha'mma. Tha'mma is a serious critic of nationalism, not unlike some contemporary historians, who have said that nationalism merely 'invents nations where

they do not exist'[6] and that 'nations lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye.'[7] Borders between nations are equally thin, in fact, non-existent for the narrator, as he belongs to the privileged socio-economic class, for whom the world is small as it has shrunk to a cross-cultural, cosmopolitan yet a complex heterogeneity, which can nevertheless be conceptualized as a single entity.

Taking the end of the novel into account, for instance, it is not easy to say which has become the narrator's real home — the truncated version of his family in Calcutta (India) which is now without its most motivated, opinionated, energetic member in the person of Tha'mma, with whom he shared a love-hate relationship, or May's home in London where he gets an insight into the significant event of Tridib's death and the desirable experience of his first adult, sexual relationship. Like his affluent and globetrotting relatives, he, too, becomes a citizen of the world, though perhaps at some human cost to himself and his identity. In the process, the contradiction in terms of the interchangeability of 'coming' and 'going' becomes more of an acceptable way of life for him than the jocular interludes with Tha'mma would suggest.

As I have said before, the lines of chronology, that distinguish a remembered past from an actual present are done away with, as the narrator narrates his tale. As a result, the form of the novel does not follow a linear time sequence, but keeps shifting between the past and the present resulting in 'an imaginative renewal of times, places, events and people past, through the recuperation of stories from the family archives.'[8] Reverberations of past things, which lend credence and meaning to present events, posit a cyclical notion of time. The patterns of repetition juxtapose the personal upheaval in the life of the narrator against the public turmoil that the country is going through.

The narrator also writes in a mode, which tries to overcome what human reason believes to be the watertight categories of two people's experiences. He is able to conquer the impenetrable spaces that lie between people to a certain extent by living through their experiences; his credibility as a narrator could come under question otherwise. The novel recounts the

experiences of May, for instance, through a letter that Tridib wrote to her about the bombed out cinema hall, or through Robi's and May's account of the events leading to Tridib's death, which are all recovered through the narratorial voice. In the process of the narrator's flouting of these principles of division, the novel dwells on a potential collapsing of categories between a certain reality and an imaginative exploration of other realities that appear to be out of reach. The narrator's jumping of the borderline of reality to reach forth towards that which he experiences only through imagination, is one of the major 'shadow lines' that he attempts to transcend in the novel.

It is an equally exciting imaginative experience for the narrator to trascend the hierarchies of social class. Unlike his middle-class mother, who desperately wants to cling on to her niche in that class after the dislocation that she suffered during the partition, he does not seem to be content with his child's position within a middle-class family. He is far more interested in wishfully participating in the goings-on in the Mayadebi branch of the family, which did better than his family, both financially and socially. These relatives, like Ila and her mother, provide the narratives that transport him to places like Colombo and Cairo, although most of the extraordinary experiences in the novel are recovered through the street-corner stories of Tridib. The latter cannot presume to be the voice of the authenticity that is attributed to the success and prosperity of that class, and yet has the narrator and other younger boys mesmerized.

The narrator is equally curious about those relatives who could not make it like those boys, for instance, the Dhakuria branch of Jethamoshai's family. They do not seem to be overly conscious or troubled by differences of class suggested by the sordid ambience of their living quarters in Dhakuria. The pronounced economic and social disparity between the two families is prefigured in Tha'mma's sarcastic rejoinder to the maid who comes to show them the way to the place, and introduces herself as Mrinmoyee, for 'she was always savagely cutting with maidservants who had names which struck her as being pretentious for their station' (130). Although intolerant of

the 'lines' between nations, Tha'mma is a self-righteous upholder of the 'lines' between classes.

The narrator realizes that it is the landscape to which Mrinmoyee introduces them that 'lent the note of hysteria to my mother's voice when she drilled me for my examinations' (134), and that all it would take, was a couple of failed examinations for him to get sucked into that landscape. Even as a school going boy, the narrator ironically realizes it to be 'that sludge which gave our genteel decorum its fine edge of frenzy' (134). However, in the course of this episode, it is the narrator's father, not his mother, who is afraid of losing his security by reestablishing a familial connection with relatives who live in a virtual slum and whose twenty-five-year old, good-for-nothing son could influence the decent upbringing of his own son at an impressionable age. For the narrator, however, it is as easy to politely look away as to subsume within the reality of his existence as imaginative yet full-blooded a partaking of the experience of the 'other' as his family would permit him. Although the narrator's privileging of the upper class experience in foreign locales as a way of life that opens out the world at large to him is what concerns most of the novel, his latently uninhibited response to relatives who are lower down in the social scale, prompted by his Tha'mma's excitement at meeting them after so long, and his mother's humane concern after actually being told about the problems they face, is suggested, but not developed in the course of the novel. The desire to jump the 'lines' between people, times, classes and nations is in consonance with the structure of the novel.

The two parts of the novel do not demonstrate a thesis and an antithesis, or a point and a counterpoint, but are the aspects of a whole that cannot be divided into two self-sufficient aspects of 'going away' and 'coming home.' They coalesce to make it an organized whole, a structure of experience somewhat similar to the formulaic structure that one finds in children's fiction.

IV

However, it is not a matter of arbitrary structuring that the scenes that question the 'lines' of hatred between nations fall in

the second half of the novel. These scenes help the narrator to 'come home,' or perceive and recognize certain home truths about the world around him. A premonition for some kind of coming to terms with the reality around him happens in three episodes of the novel. The first is when his Tha'mma questions the rationale behind the meaningless bloodshed, violence and trauma caused by the partition of India and Pakistan, though it has not even succeeded in creating an actual border that is visible from a plane. 'What was it all for then — partition and all the killing and everything — if there isn't something in between?' (151-52), she asks. She also cannot understand 'how her place of birth could be at such odds with her nationality.' In the second instance, a relatively unimportant character in the novel, Jethamoshai challenges anybody who would engage him on the issue of the 'home.' He does not want to come to India, declaring that he cannot be expected to shift his home any time the borders between the two countries are drawn. There is a rhetorical flourish in his question 'suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then?' (215)

I have already discussed the third instance, which is one of the climactic scenes in which the narrator communicates with himself and interrogates the dividing 'lines' between countries. Beginning 'a nostalgic journey down the land of looking-glass events' (225), he is upset, even horrified to realize that equidistant parts from the centre on the globe have the capacity to arouse such vicious passions or leave a person cold, depending on what man-made boundaries lie between the centre and the different points on the circumference. Yet the irony of all this 'enchantment of lines' is 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 [...] (233).

These scenes in the novel augment the narrator's awareness of the significant realities of the world around him, and are hence deeply felt experiential constituents of the novel, which makes it a bildungsroman. In travel literature, the adventurer/traveller

always returns home, and in the kind of children's fiction that takes the child protagonist through a real or imaginary escapade out of his/her limited and limiting environment, the child usually returns home. *The Shadow Lines* is not a children's story; despite the title of the second part, it does not suggest a literal coming back to India and home. At the point the novel ends, 'coming home,' for the narrator, is literally just one 'airlines flight' away. But apart from the scenes of 'coming to terms' discussed above, its 'coming home' happens through the narrator's relationship with a woman, which would not have been the case if the novel were just a children's story. In the last interlude, he 'comes home' to roost in May's arms, and finds a one-night haven in her home just before he is due to return to India. In this 'coming home' scene, she reconstructs the facts of Tridib's death, letting the narrator know the truth and her interpretation of it. In the process, the two rediscover each other, in the context of Tridib's death. The coming together of the narrator and May is not just closeness between two people, but a solidarity of certain convictions they share with some other people in the novel too, who are no longer alive. Tha'mma, Jethamoshai and Tridib, all of them, in their own way, help the narrator to realize the futility of 'lines.' Subsequently, the Atlas scene, May's account of her naïve but uncompromising stand on communal violence, the scene of Tridib's death which was a 'mystery' that 'redeems' all earlier impressions of him as a 'wastrel' and 'loafer' — all these serve an educative purpose for the narrator.

Whether the bonding between May and the narrator, predicated on a sympathetic understanding of and identification with Tridib as a person, and peace and communal harmony as a cause, is fragile or not is something for the reader to decide. But it is precisely her idealistic position about certain things that makes her a sympathetic character, one who shares, in a very fundamental way, a kindred line of thinking with the narrator, tormented by the 'lines' between nations, communities and people, in the Atlas scene.

May is all what remains of the memory of Tridib, yet May is unlike Tridib — she is not a deviant, a freak or an idler. Her acts

of social conscience do not show any fundamental differences with the establishment of which she is a part. She is sufficiently rooted in the values of the system, and is prepared to deviate from it somewhat, if required. She is altruistic and socially conscious — she collects money for charitable causes and sleeps on a mattress because she does not feel the need to sleep on a bed, with its superfluity of cushioned comfort. She feels strongly about certain social issues and quietly contributes to social cause. She is politically correct, as she always takes the side of the oppressed; even a wounded dog merits her attention. Unlike Ila, she does not wear her ideology on her sleeve. Nor does she brandish her 'unconventional' views about things, or dabble in radical politics, as Ila does.

The narrator lets himself 'go away' with the help of Tridib, and 'comes home' with the help of May, the two characters in the novel who are closest to him in their imaginative participation and social conscience about the world around them. Ironically, the narrator 'comes home' when he is in the arms of an Englishwoman in a country, that is far away from the same geographically and socially delimiting 'home' which had been offered to him both by his Tha'mma and his own mother. When the narrator finds himself seeking a haven in May's bed in the last scene, is he like the hero of children's story, *returning* to a conventionally good person's charge? Or is he choosing an option that is a deviation from the norm — a temporary solace from an Englishwoman, the girlfriend of his dead uncle, and much older than him? May's ambivalent position between a conventional mother-sister-girlfriend figure and an unconventional person to turn to for an ordinary, middle-class Bengali young man, makes it a complex and adult novel. Unlike in children's fiction, the narrator, who is at the threshold of adulthood, finds 'home' in woman arms, far away from his literal home. The coming together of May and the narrator is based on a promise that the Tridibs of the world will not be forgotten. The novel ends on an unarticulated hope of keeping alive the Tridibs of the world, who are obliterated from, or at best marginalized in the memories of 'respectable' people. This would not have been the case, if the novel were meant for

children. But it was given to Ghosh to resurrect Tridib in an adult novel.

Notes and References

All references to the text are from Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*. Delhi: OUP, 1998.

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6. Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change*. London, 1964, 169.
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8. Suvir Kaul, "Separation Anxiety: Growing up Inter/National in *The Shadow Lines*" in *The Shadow Lines* (Delhi: OUP, 1998), 269.

PART I

1

The Shadow Lines as a Memory Novel

MANJULA SAXENA

To determine whether Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is a memory novel or not, we will have to answer two questions. First, what is memory? What are its distinctive features? And second, are these features present in *The Shadow Lines*? One allied question that must be answered would be, that even if a few distinctive features of memory are present in the novel, have they been retained in their original form or have they been changed or modified? And, finally, if they have been modified, what all has taken place during the process of modification? To put it very simply, in what form or dimensions, does memory figure in *The Shadow Lines*? To answer this, we will very briefly look at what memory has done to the work in question. Is it actively making the novel or is the novel just a collection of memories?

Let us get back to the first question: What is memory? We all understand it rightly to be a psychological process as much integral to our consciousness as thinking is. We are rational because we think, and also because we memorize. We use these faculties consciously when we learn our lessons for taking examinations, or subconsciously when different experiences leave their impressions on our minds, without our becoming aware of this. So, both thinking and memory are the very essence of our rationality; they contribute equally to our learning. But, then, they are not identical. Memory is both rational and

emotive — pertaining to the cognitive and the affective parts of personality. Thinking, on the other hand, even as understanding and not as mere awareness is purely rational — completely devoid of feelings, emotions and sentiments, which are the components of our affective life. Memory, therefore, is perhaps more gratifying than the purely objective, disinterested kind of thinking. Literary artists, poets and novelists alike have acknowledged the presence of emotive element in memory. No wonder, the famous poet Shelley alludes to memory in these words:

We look before and after,
And pine for what is not
Our sweetest songs,
With some pain are fraught.

(*Ode to Skylark*)

The word 'pain' here is indicative of the emotion accompanying memory. Similarly, Ghosh, the novelist makes the narrator of his novel recall his own experiences with a fondness — another emotive element. Take for instance, the narrator's following recollection of an incident, pertaining to Tridib:

> When I was about nine Tridib once stayed away from his haunts for so long that regulars began to wonder what had happened to him [...]. Then, one evening I heard that he had surfaced at Gole park again. I [...] found him [...] and heard him say 'I have been to London [...] I have English relatives through marriage'[...]. It was then [...] that I cried: Tridibda [...] you made a mistake. You were in your room, smoking [...]. There was a howl of laughter and a chorus of exclamations: You fraud, you liar [...] you haven't been anywhere [...] another sharper voice broke in and said [...] the fact is that he is a nut he has never been anywhere outside Calcutta[1] (12).

The narrator 'was furious with himself for having exposed Tridib to their ridicule [...] shouting he told them the truth as he knew it: that Tridib had been to London, with his parents, many years ago when he was a boy' (12-13). The point to be noted here is that in recalling his attempt to undo the damage to Tridib's

reputation, the narrator feels relieved and happy. Now, happiness, undoubtedly, is a state of emotion.

Memory of experiences, unlike that of facts is *either happy or sad but never indifferent*; thinking, on the other hand, is definitely non-emotive as when I think about an abstract concept like 'space,' or my solving a mathematical problem. I do these activities by exercising my mind or rationality alone; but, memory, I may repeat, is both rational and emotive. That is why, it is an apt instrument and sustainer of the creation of a work of literary art.

Socrates long ago mentioned some important features of memory, which we need to discuss in the context of *The Shadow Lines*. Here is what Socrates said to Theaetetus about memory:

> Imagine, then, for the sake of argument, that our minds contain a block of wax, which in this or that individual may be larger or smaller, and composed of wax that is comparatively pure or muddy, and harder in some, softer in others, and sometimes just the right consistency. Let us call it the gift of the Muses' mother, Memory, and say that whenever we wish to remember something we see or hear or conceive in our own minds, we hold this wax under perceptions or ideas and imprint them on it as we might stamp the impression of a seal-ring. Whatever is so imprinted we remember and know so long as the image remains; whatever is rubbed out or has not succeeded in leaving an impression we have forgotten or do not know.[2]

This statement by the great Socrates contains the following truths about memory:

1. Memory, like all knowledge begins in perception or experience. Before sense-perception, or as the philosopher would insist, before the *determinate* kind of perception begins, mind is a 'blank slate' or *Tabula Rasa* as Hume calls it; it does not have the traces of memory on it.
2. Experiences leave some kind of a trace, which goes into the formation of the fund of memory. Now, I ask, is not *The Shadow Lines* also an organised structure of

memories? Just as the table is made of wood and nails and adhesives, similarly, Ghosh's novel is apparently, at least, made up of the narrator's memories relating to Tridib, his relatives and acquaintances. There are memories of various characters, like the narrator's grandmother's, of Mayadebi's, the narrator's cousin Ila's and of Mary's — the acquaintance of both Tridib and the narrator, and so on. Then, there are memories of the normal or stylized behaviour of these characters. Referring to the grandmother, the narrator says: 'For her, likes and dislikes were unimportant' or 'She [grandmother] would pretend to dismiss him with a toss of her head' (6). Then, in this fund of memory there are memories of places. The author recalls the grandmother's observation, namely, 'Tridib living in that crumbling house' (6) or the stall at the corner of his lane where Nathu Chaubey sat, or the place at the far end of the garden of Queen Victoria's house in Sri Lanka where the thala-goya, seeing a snake thrashed at the end of its rope, 'battering the tree it was tied to' (28) — all these instances are the memories of the places. Further, there are memories of conversations among different characters, even memories of recognition, say, 'We recalled how quickly we had taught ourselves to distinguish the shapes of their aircrafts from ours' (22), and of the character's reactions like 'Trigonometry!' in the context of the grandmother's observation that her uncle did not let any Muslim come within ten feet of his shadow in his younger days or 'playfully, he [the old man] waggled his head' at May and she smiled back (213). In other words, innumerable memories of different kinds, have gone into the making of the novel, serving as the matter (and not the subject matter) of the work. Moreover, all memories are traceable to perceptions in the fictional world. This is in accordance with the Socratic view that memory begins in perception.

3. The next important idea implicit in the statement of Socrates is that there are individual differences in memory. This is especially significant in the context of

> the works of literary art, of which *The Shadow Lines* is a brilliant example. We may recapitulate what Socrates tells Theaetetus, '[...] Our minds contain a block of wax, which in this or that individual may be [...] pure or muddy, and hard in some, softer in others [...]. Here, the 'hard' is the less sensitive, and 'softer' is the more sensitive receptivity of an individual which results in shallow or deep memories, respectively. I am sure, that like all artists, Ghosh/his narrator is also blessed with a 'softer' memory. Otherwise, how could he remember so much in such minute and vivid detail? Remembering May Price exactly as she had looked seventeen years ago, the narrator says:
>
> Her hair was still cut exactly as I remembered it from the time she had stayed with us in Calcutta: falling thick and straight to her shoulders, mantling her head and the sides of her face; but where I remembered it as dark and glossy, it was streaked now with strands of gray which shimmered when they caught the light (14).

Or, when he recalls hearing, even in the drunken state, 'the sound of feet pounding heavily after him' (155), or the vital fact mentioned in the letter that was written by Maya Debi to the narrator's grandmother — 'Maya Debi wrote that she had not been able to visit their old house yet [...]' (189-90). Without a softer, that is, more alert sensitivity, how could the narrator remember that his grandmother gasped with disappointment and nostalgia on seeing the courtyard of her ancestral house. 'A workshop [...] inside our courtyard! What's become of the old jackfruit tree?' (190).

There is no doubt that the more sensitive people have a 'softer,' more impressionable memory, but not all such people are artistic in temperament. Equally true is the fact that all artists, literary or performing, have a 'softer' memory as the material cause for their creative endeavour. They also store and retain their experiences for longer periods, to be used purposively later — in fact, more purposively than a layman does. Impelled by their inherent tendency to use up every possible memory for the creation of some or the other work of art, artists receive

almost every impression more fully and this they can do only with the softer memory material. This softer memory material does not allow, in their case, events to just happen and pass them by. Rather, in their case, impressions of all events are deliberately gathered up and then remain dormant in their memory till such time as the retainer finds the occasions for their actual use. Then they are recollected and transformed, at least, by literary artists like Ghosh into the materials of narratives.

Such memories are, necessarily, invariably accompanied by the artist's awareness and understanding as to how he is going to use them effectively in the creation of a work of art. I clearly see this happening in *The Shadow Lines*. Possessed of a highly refined sensitivity, Ghosh's main fictional characters, retain, may be unconsciously, their experiences, and relate them to the experiences of the other characters in the novel, directly or indirectly, immediately or remotely. Ghosh, the literary artist, has woven them all into an organic unity, befitting a successful novel. He has done it through narrative devices with the help of which the raw material *i.e.* memories, have got organised and become a major component of the novel.

Let us now very briefly discuss the implication of the next idea in the statement by Socrates. It is this: in our psychological life, forgetting occurs and may occur at different times for different reasons. One is the biological reason, which affects everyone — the mental faculties become weak in old age and one starts forgetting. The other reason for forgetting is that one tends to forget that which one does not like. Generally, the pleasant and the useful are remembered and the unpleasant is forgotten. This characteristic of memory, that is, its being selective, is also quite evident in *The Shadow Lines*.

> When the narrator tells Ila how he 'longed to Visit Cairo, to see the world's first pointed arch in the mosque of Ibn Tulun, and touch the stones of the Great Pyramid of Cheops [...]. She clicked her fingers, gave herself a satisfied nod, and said aloud, inadvertently oh yes, Cairo, the Ladies is way away on the other side of the departure lounge (20).

Here the narrator remembers and recalls Cairo, for its beauty and interesting historical architecture. In contrast, Ila remembers 'the Ladies' and only the Ladies — a utility. The rest of Cairo has been either forgotten or it simply does not get registered on her mind. Ila's memory is clearly selective in *The Shadow Lines*.

Coming now to the third question, that is: In what form is memory present in the novel? Let us, for a moment, suppose that the majority of incidents, narrated in the novel, never actually occurred. Historical events like the two riots and biographical facts of the author's own life can, of course, not be denied. But supposing that the author has only imagined the rest of the events, can the work be still called a memory novel? Here we will have to take note of a fact. Very often it is maintained that memory belongs to the past and imagination to future. Should we then presume that in a narrative, imagination plays no part? Further, is it proper to hold that memory and imagination are so exclusive of each other that they can never interact, not even in a narrative? The answer is a firm 'no.' In fact, the two not only coexist but also, more often than not, work together in unison. For example, while narrating the September 11 incident of America, do we not even today imagine some of its details to make it a complete account? We do. We recall the actual attack as we watched it on news channels but we also imagine some of the consequences that were never shown — the ones, we know for certain, have taken place. Not only the narration of the incident but also our memory of it is bound to include the merely imagined details of the incident. The point is that memory is imaginative and imagination can fabricate memories. This is exactly how memory and imagination function in unison in Ghosh's work. *The Shadow Lines*, to be sure, is interplay of imagination and memory — memory recalling certain incidents and imagination weaving memories. Tridib's Gastric mentioned in *The Shadow Lines* is a recollection of a fact but it also includes the narrator imagining it as a special organ — peculiar to Tridib. It is a clear case of memory and imagination interweaving effectively to create an artistic element in the work (5).

Creative or aesthetic memory is a device as integral to artistic creation as actual memory is to learning. The famous aesthetician S.K. Langer calls it the 'virtual memory' or the 'semblance' of memory. Distinction between actual and 'virtual memory' can be likened to the one that the German philosopher Kant draws between noumena and phenomena — so basic to his theory of knowledge. Noumenon, according to Kant, is the thing-in-itself; and phenomenon, is the thing-as-it-appears to us. Only the latter, in Kant's view, is the true object of knowledge. We know a thing, as it appears to us generally as existing in space and time and arranged in a causal order. For example, fire and smoke are two separate events but we know them generally as each other's cause and effect and as occurring in space and time. Space and time as well as causal relation are, for Kant, mental categories, which we necessarily impose onto the object of perception. That these categories are mental, Kant argues by saying that being infinite, they cannot be parts of the finite outer world. So, in every perception, space, time and the causal relation are imposed on the thing-in-itself by the mind, thus converting it into 'phenomenon.' Similarly, aesthetic memory is actual memory as it has been acted upon by the creative imagination of the artist when he uses it. This modification of memory is necessary. As S.K. Langer says:

> [...] Whereas actual experience is a welter of sights, sounds, feelings and, physical strains, expectations and minute undeveloped reactions, memory sifts all this material and represents it in the form of only distinguishable events. Sometimes, the events are logically connected [...] but most events are recalled as separate incidents and can be dated only by being thought of in a causal order [...].[3]

Further, Langer referring to memory in the context of narratives says: 'Narrative is a major organizing device. It is important to literature as representation is to painting and sculpture.'[4] Putting the two quotations together we understand that narration, which is integral to a novel or a story and in fact to most of the literary arts, necessarily, organizes the diverse elements of the work, so that memory or imagination even as the material cause of the literary work becomes different from the original memory.

Clarifying the distinctive nature of this memory for narratives, Langer says:

> Sometimes the memories of different places and activities [...] are so incongruous that we have to recall and arrange a series of intervening events before we really feel convinced that the two such diverse situations belong to the same life. Especially when memory is very vivid it has no continuity. The deeply impressed incident seems to rise out of the past all alone with such extraordinary detail that it suggests an experience just passed [...].[5]

Finally, about the distinctive feature of narratives of which *The Shadow Lines* is a striking example, Langer says, 'narratives of memories always have semblance of memory more purely than actual history.' In the context of the art of poetry she observes that 'the poet makes a semblance of events that is experience-like, but universally accessible; an objectified, depersonalized 'memory' entirely homogenous, no matter how much is explicit and how much implicit.'[6] However, in a lyric this 'semblance' is that of a very limited event, whereas in a sustained narrative, say, a novel, this semblance is comprised of a series of events.

Langer's main idea pertaining to memory is fourfold: first that recollection, particularly of the narrative type necessarily organizes memories in various ways. Second, that in the nexus of memory, a single memory may stand out for a variety of reasons, so much so that it appears almost self-complete. Thirdly, two radically opposite events can be seen to belong to the same life by recalling the relatively minor intervening detail, and finally that in narratives 'virtual memory' is present in its purest form, unaffected by actual memory. Now let us see whether these features of 'virtual memory' are present in Ghosh's work or not.

The narrator in *The Shadow Lines* relates different kinds of events and experiences in different ways. For instance, he interrelates the two political events, namely, the war of 1962 and the riots of 1964, differentiating them from each other and then in the same breath mentions a cricket match that was played during the same period as the riots. He remembers this

disparate detail in the context of the riots. Subsequently, it helps him to notice a headline in the newspaper, which says: 'Twenty-nine killed in riots' (222-23).

Similarly, the event of the CBI recovering the Mu-I-Mubarak, with people of Srinagar rejoicing at its recovery, assumes importance in the context of a significant event: 'When I was reading through that short report for the fifth time, it struck me suddenly, like a slap in the face, that May, Tridib, and my grandmother must have left for Dhaka the day before' (226). We notice that, through such examples, Ghosh is not only relating different events, he is even dating them in a causal order. When the narrator notices that Malik is getting a little impatient with him and not paying attention to what he is telling him, he feels impelled to act so as to interest him. Noticing Malik's inattention is the cause of what the narrator does next. He frantically tries to find evidence in support of his contention that the riots of 1964 did happen and claimed many lives. He remembers all this vividly. Similarly, the recovery of Mu-I-Mubarak and the accompanying celebrations help him mark the day of the departure of May, Tridib and his grandmother. All these memories get directly or indirectly related in different ways to build up the novel.

The second important point in Langer's concept of 'virtual memory' is this: an event may stand out among other events because of its sheer emotional impact. I may illustrate this with the help of the following excerpt from the novel:

> Ridiculous though he was, I was alarmed by the tone of his voice [...] as he said, 'we have received information [...]. that you have been visiting prostitutes in houses of ill repute [...].
>
> I was so taken aback that I managed to say: who has given you this information sir?
>
> Your own grandmother [...] you can see for yourself. The writing was unmistakably my grandmother's [...] I was so shaken by the sight of her resurrected hand, reaching out to me after her death. I have never understood how she learnt of the women I had visited a couple of times, with

> my friends nor do I know how she saw that I was in love with Ila so long before I dared to admit it to myself (92-93).

The incident can be seen to stand out due to its sheer emotional impact. It is a finished, discrete, incident, with an absolute identity of its own. That is why it lingers on in the narrator's memory without ever leading him to the next memory in the series, in the narrator's mind. Nor does it refer to his memory of the incidents prior to it. It is a self-complete entity and it not only gets retained in the protagonist's mind but also dominates it.

Yet another idea of Langer about aesthetic or 'virtual memory' is that 'sometimes [...] we have to recall and arrange a series of intervening events before we really feel convinced that two such diverse situations belong to the same life.'[7] I may cite the following example from *The Shadow Lines* to illustrate it:

> When we were fourteen, she [Ila] once pointed to a picture of a boy who, to me, already looked like a grown man with a face like an American film star [...]. His name is Jamshed Tabrizi, she said, he is a fencing champion and this year his father gave him a BMW sports car for his birthday [...] and as soon as he gets his license, we are going to drive down to the beach at Pattaya [...]. And then, in a rush, looking at me sideways, she added, he is my boyfriend (23).

But a few lines later, 'he was [...] with his arm thrown around the shoulders of two laughing blonde girls [...] and [...] Ila herself on the edge of the back row [...] standing with a book under her arm.

She saw that I had noticed this, and when I came upon that yearbook again a week later, I discovered that the page had been torn out' (23).

The memory of Ila tearing out a page from the yearbook helps the narrator relate definitely two separate incidents to Ila's life — her claim of being intimate with a so-called boyfriend and her subsequent isolation in a foreign land. They are seen as

related to the same person by the narrator because of his recollection of the intervening incident of Ila tearing the page.

Finally, to explain what Langer means by saying that narratives always have semblance of memory 'more purely than actual history,' I may cite the following example:

> That house, that one, just down the road, over there, [...] is called Lymington mansions [...] an incendiary bomb fell on it, and burned down two floors. That was on the 1st of October 1940, two days before your uncle died (56).

A bomb falling on a building can be an event recorded in history, accessible to all but it is not presented there as an experiential event; it does not get recalled by anyone, in particular. So, strictly speaking, this incident has not been acted upon by anyone's mind and, therefore, is not a case of 'virtual memory.' Not being subjective or experiential, it is not an example of a 'semblance' of memory. But in the piece of narrative above, a particular memory — namely, that the Lymington mansions have been partly destroyed, is being remembered as an event. The memory of this event has remained imprinted on the mind of the narrator, because it is experienced with sadness as a personal loss. Subjective factors, integral to 'virtual memory' creep in. That is why, it is being recalled so vividly and it remains inextricably bound up with his life. Such a recalled or imagined incident is also accessible to all but it necessarily evokes emotive response in them. It may be noted that an incident created in a work of literary art, and the same incident recorded in a book of history, will be received differently. Whereas the former may evoke an emotional or aesthetic response, the latter will be received as a piece of objective history. In the former it is the presentation of memory as semblance or phenomenal memory, and in the latter it is the gathering of pure, objective kind of information, like the one which a reader gets while reading a book on current affairs. Only the disinterested and dispassionate understanding is involved in reading such a factual book.

To conclude, Ghosh has used memory in all its dimensions not merely as the 'efficient' but also as the 'material'

cause of the novel. Just as the activity of the carpenter is the 'efficient' cause of the table, similarly the act of recalling done by the author/narrator is the 'efficient' cause of the novel. Further, the content of recollection is the 'memories' of which the narrative is composed. Such memories are the 'material' cause of the work in the same way as wood is the 'material' cause of the table. However, the final purpose of the novel is to create an image of personal and social history, which is a non-memory goal. Yet to achieve this objective, Ghosh has made maximum and effective use of memory in almost all its dimensions and forms. Even if the novel were constituted of imaginary incidents, cast in the mnemonic mode of 'virtual memory,' it would still be considered as a memory novel.

Notes and References

1. Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 12. All subsequent quotations from the text refer to this edition, and their page numbers are given in the parentheses.
2. Socrates' views about memory in an extract from Plato's *Theory of Knowledge* in F.M. Cornford Trans. (1935), 121.
3. S.K. Langer in *Feeling and Form*, Chapter 15, "Virtual Memory" (London: Routledge. & Kegan Paul, 1953, Third impression 1963), 263.
4. *Ibid.* 261.
5. *Ibid.* 264.
6. *Ibid.* 265.
7. *Ibid.* 264.

5

The Shadow Lines Between Freedom and Violence

ALPANA NEOGY

Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* has woven fact and fiction in a complex, absorbing narrative that mirrors lives across nations and spans almost half a century of recent Indian history. The reader looks at love and loyalty and examines the questions of fidelity and accountability, of tradition and modernity, of freedom and its evanescent quality.

As the British Empire collapsed and lines were drawn up dividing the Indian subcontinent, thousands were exiled. The changes brought about in three generations of a Bengali family dispersed across three countries as a result of historical changes in the land is the focus of this novel: it brings out the confusion and the trauma of the East Bengali *shikkhita madhyabitta* (the educated middle class) uprooted and lost after the dismembering of Bengal in 1947.

Meenakshi Mukherjee while reviewing Ghosh's latest novel *The Glass Palace* writes:

> Each of Amitav Ghosh's books, (except *Countdown*), invariably focuses on themes in history and connections across geography that have seldom been explored before, and does so with imagination supported by archival research, his narrative inventiveness matched by his luminous prose.[1]

In an article in *The Times of India*[2] written soon after the publication of the novel, *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh had described the recent events in the country — the terrorist attacks, the caste riots, the shootings in Kashmir — as 'lurid hallucinations.' Most Indians and foreigners would consider these happenings as 'an endemic disease, a plague peculiar to the subcontinent.' But at the bottom all the uprisings revolve around a single issue: 'identity.' Ghosh believes that the issue of identity lies at the heart of democracy. Perhaps this 'disease' and the 'issue of identity' could be traced to the story of 1947, which according to Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin is:

> a gendered narrative of displacement and dispossession, of large-scale and widespread communal violence, and of the realignment of family, community and national identities as people were forced to accommodate the dramatically altered reality that now prevailed.[3]

Ghosh's novel incorporates all these traumas. Tha'mma, the narrator's grandmother, born and brought up in Dhaka, has to accept the grim reality that after 1947, Dhaka is no longer her home. She might have well asked, 'Who am I? Am I an Indian merely because I am a Hindu and live in Calcutta?' Given a choice, she would rather have stayed on in Dhaka. In Calcutta, where she settles down after the sudden death of her husband, she lives in the less-affluent locality of Bhowanipore. Dhaka would remain a 'home' only in her memory, a 'home' that she could not go to.

Ghosh explores the concept and meaning of freedom and identity, themes very crucial to the modern man. Political freedom was a momentous event that happened in 1947 when India became independent. Equality and freedom were granted to all the citizens of this country, irrespective of caste, creed or sex. By liberating themselves of the shackles of the British Empire, people thought, that they had achieved something very precious, which the Empire had denied them — the freedom of the individual.

Once this freedom was legally granted to them, it became evident that while it was easy to enact a law, it was very difficult to actually experience this freedom because of the complex and

contradictory forces inherent in the Indian society. These forces are difficult to restrain or contain in the existing circumstances and they have introduced the divisive tendencies that tear the country apart. But what is freedom for one may be enslavement for another. The political freedom of 1947 may mean nothing to her/him who sees herself/himself now under another yoke, where earlier it had been a foreign one. One is almost forced to ask: can one really be free, personally, socially or politically?

The women characters in the novel — Tha'mma, Ila and May — from different cultures and generations, provide an apt study of this dilemma. Each has an incomplete understanding of the true nature of freedom. It is the narrator's point of view that is paramount. He interacts with each one of them and we get to know of their limited vision and their idiosyncrasies and foibles by watching them through his eyes. In the process, the theme of freedom is explored, developed and assessed.

Freedom means different things to the different characters, depending on the stage they occupy in the backdrop of recent Indian history. Tha'mma had been a young girl in Dhaka when the freedom struggle had reached its peak. Later she had witnessed the birth of two new nations, experienced the pain associated with the partition of the land, and participated in the new order and the new political system that evolved out of that experience.

To Ila, two generations later, the spirit of nationalism that had inspired Tha'mma, is a thing of the past. She is a post-partition child. She is unable to conform or adapt to the society that has developed in independent India and escapes to another society with a different set of values, a different social system. For each one of them, namely, Tha'mma and Ila, the concept of freedom has been moulded by their own individual experience and the different worlds that they inhabit.

As a student in Dhaka, Tha'mma had been exposed to the fierce revolutionary nationalist spirit that was sweeping through Bengal. She, too, would have liked to be a part of the freedom movement, to run errands for the terrorists, participate in demonstrations, to spread propaganda, and to hide and transport weapons, even make explosives — but was unable to do any of

these because she was a 'woman'[4] (39). The annals of Bengal resonate with the courage and valour of many women[5] who had actively participated in the revolutionary movement in the 1930's. Listening about such deeds of heroism had shaped Tha'mma's entire personality. One has to be ready to die for one's country, ready even to kill, she tells her grandson almost thirty years later when he tries to make her believe that Ila had chosen to stay on in England because she wanted to be 'free' (88). Tha'mma never permits herself any over-indulgence, and works hard at her job. She feels that the political freedom obtained after long years of foreign rule required dedication of each citizen.

However, the freedom won in 1947 did not create that perfect order that Tha'mma had hoped for. In fact, the political freedom won by the nation had created grounds for animosity and hatred by drawing up superfluous lines, demarcating nations and boundaries. Curiously, she was an Indian national, but her place of birth was Dhaka. Her distress and disillusionment is evident when she has to fill up the disembarkation card before landing at Dhaka airport and she is not 'able to quite understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality' (152).

Her disenchantment is complete when she realizes that her sacrifice has been in vain:

> 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 will be just like it used to be before [...]. What was it all for then — partition and all the killing and everything — if there isn't something in between? (151)

After Tridib's death, Tha'mma's idealism fades fast, as she witnesses the anarchic tendencies gaining control over the land. She reverts to a militant form of nationalism (Ila calls her 'a war mongering fascist') and she donates her jewellery to the Defence Fund. Now it is 'us' and 'them' — 'them' being all those who live in her former homeland now. The citizens were required to make sacrifices in order to preserve political freedom; it had to

be defended from forces inimical to it. One must be ready even to kill to preserve this freedom.

Ila is an enigmatic character. She tries to be free and feels that Indian milieu is alien to her. Unfortunately, so is the other world that she has adopted as her own, where she believes she can be free. She tries her best to be accepted by the people of her adopted land, but her experience tells her that she will never be completely accepted by them. As a child she had attended various schools in different countries but in the group photograph of her class she figures as standing apart, not quite one of the group. However, she tries to convince the narrator that she was popular and accepted by her group. She is a victim of racism in the International school in England and suffers, physically and emotionally, as her classmates reject her. Naturally, she feels isolated, alone and miserable.

Ila wants to live in the present and experience the world through the senses. When she visits India, she insists that Robi and the narrator go with her to a bar for a drink. They reluctantly accompany her. But when Robi does not let her dance with a stranger, she is bitter and expresses her extreme disgust at the conservative nature of Indian society. Neither in India nor abroad does Ila show her awareness of the *bhadralok* lifestyle of modern Bengal, which is essentially a mix of 'modernity' and 'tradition' — the outward mannerisms of western speech and dress coexisting in complete harmony with orthodox basic concerns of family life and morality.

As an adult, Ila gives the impression of being a drifter, not quite sure about what she wants. Before her marriage, she lives with a group of youngsters who specialize in organizing pickets. They were very 'practical' (97) — for hours they argue about which kind of pen was better for drawing posters or they discuss how to go about making arrangements for lunch or tea. There were no political debates and it did not take the narrator long to observe that Ila was regarded as a kind of guest, almost a decoration. But Ila thought that she was politically committed. This superficial behavior she had displayed even as a child when she could associate Cairo only with the location of the 'Ladies' at the airport. No wonder, if Tridib said of her that even

though she had lived in so many places all over the world, she had not really travelled.

Ila is unwilling to accept India as her home, as she has never really lived there and cannot identify herself with its culture. She also knows that her adopted country is not keen to accept her. She is an alien, an outsider and the desire for acceptance produces tension in her. Eventually, in her effort to establish her roots in the West, she marries Nick, an Englishman. He is disloyal to her soon after, yet much against her wish, she decides to shrug off his waywardness and stay in England and continue to be his wife.

Ila's disillusionment brings into focus the strengths and limitations of the two cultures. Ila finds Indian culture too restrictive, too conservative. But in India, generally speaking, institutions like marriage are considered stable. Ila rejects everything Indian, but eventually she finds herself 'clinging' to her uncle Robi and the narrator — the members of her family from India who have shared a common loss, the death of Tridib.

Ghosh does not project a society as superior to another society. What he does highlight, however, is the problem of freedom for the modern man. Ila's fight is against the traditions and restraints of a traditional society. She feels she would gain freedom and identity if she combats such forms of power. She fails to realize that the old forms of restraint are being replaced by new form of restraint, which warp one's personality. The sanctity of the man-woman relationship in a marriage is essential to the old order. In the pursuit of a new kind of freedom — one that would enable her to realize her true self, Ila is confronted with a different set of problems: the absence of fidelity and trust in her marriage.

As for Tridib's sense of freedom, we may mention that he wanted to meet May, who had come all the way from England, as a stranger, far from friends and relatives, in a place 'without a past, without history, free, really free, two people coming together with the utter freedom of strangers' (144). For a relationship to develop between two people, they must go beyond the limitations of the individual self, he believed.

Tridib tells the narrator 'one could never know anything except through desire, real desire, which was not the same thing as greed or lust; a pure, painful and primitive desire' (29). Undoubtedly, May too believes in this. Tridib was eight and May was a little baby when Tridib went to England. When they meet as adults for the first time in India, she is nineteen and he is twenty-seven. Before that they had corresponded with each other for a few years. When May finally visits India, Tridib is, for all practical purposes, a stranger to her. Yet, when they first meet at the railway station, they behave as if they have been close for years and in love.

Tridib had talked of going 'to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror' (29). This is a transcendental view, which closes the gap between imagination and reality. Only such a man reaches forth to others.

It is tragic that Tridib could realize his dream only in death. He tries to save a helpless old man from being attacked by a frenzied mob. He must have known in that movement that he was not going to come back alive. But it was in that moment when the border between 'oneself and one's image in the mirror' had ceased to exist for him. It was his final redemption.

Tridib had lived believing in an ideal world and remained within the confines of his room at Ballygunge Place or in ruins. He wanted to carry the limits of his mind 'to other times and other places [...]' (144) away from the crowd of friends, relatives and strangers — a world that was divided by rifts of all kinds. As such a world could not be avoided, he had to die the death of a martyr.

For May, her Indian experience haunts her for the rest of her life. 'Do you think I killed him?' (251), she asks the narrator. She finally gets a glimpse of the 'final redemptive mystery.' 'He gave himself up; it was a sacrifice' (251-52) and is at peace with herself. Till the time she understands the nature of his 'sacrifice' she is a tortured being who spends almost seventeen years of her adult life trying to understand *why* Tridib had died. She knows that if she had gone out to save Jethamoshai, the crowd would have melted away on seeing her, she being a young

English girl. At that crucial moment, it was she who had goaded Tridib to go and help. She had no other motive except to save the life of the old man and the rickshaw-puller. She did not realize that she was virtually sending Tridib towards his death. It is this guilt which haunts her. So traumatized is she that she is scared to be alone. The moment she enters her room in England lights switch on by themselves and the television automatically starts functioning. May feels 'free' when she gets an insight into the mystery of Tridib's death.

Ghosh probes the various facets of violence and how it masquerades as freedom. Violence runs as an undercurrent throughout the novel. It is explored at both the personal and the social level, as Ghosh investigates the complex connection between freedom and violence in our lives. Can one really be free? Does one have to kill to get freedom or to preserve it? How does violence enter our lives? Can there be violence, on the psychological level, even when there is no physical abuse, in a relationship between a man and a woman? These questions need to be answered.

Through Ila, Ghosh explores two kinds of violence. In peacetime England, an English girl attacks Ila after school hours. No one from her school comes to her rescue, and Nick rushes home early that day to avoid being seen in her company. Ila's knowledge of the English language is superior to that of the native schoolgirl's English. 'Well, Denise, perhaps you ought to take English lessons from *her*, even though it's your own language, not hers' (74), the teacher had remarked, when Denise was unable to write a simple sentence correctly. There are undertones of envy, racial hatred and the fear of the ascendancy of the 'other' in the attack that follows.

It is curious that when Ila's grandmother Mayadebi was in England during the Second World War, she had received warmth and friendship from everyone in war-torn London. There was 'a kind of exhilaration in the air,' a bond even between strangers, and people went out of their way to be 'friendlier' and 'nicer' and actually to be 'civil' (66) to each other. Mayadebi is impressed by this kindness and civility and says, 'I couldn't have chosen any better time to come to England [...] I've been

able to watch England coming alive' (66). The enemy could be identified — it was Germany. Perhaps the fear of the *London Blitz* made the colour of one's skin of no consequence. When the fear and the danger of the war disappeared, the bestial nature of man surfaced once again. Ila, in peacetime England, realizes that her dark skin makes her vulnerable to racial attack.

There is another kind of violence that is not physical but psychological, normally seen in a relationship that has gone sour. This violence is not visible, it is subtle and soul-destroying and leaves behind it emotional and mental scars. Nick acquires sundry girl friends for the sake of 'variety' (188) after his marriage to Ila. Nick has no job, as no job is good enough for him. The couple lives in an apartment bought by Ila's father and he lives off her salary. Perhaps the best way Nick could establish his power over Ila is by being unfaithful to her. He knows she loves him and will never leave him even if he allows girls from a 'massage parlour from Bangkok' in their house (189). She hits back in the only way that she knows — by taunting him for living off her father's wealth. To humiliate him, she sarcastically says, in front of others that Nick meant to get into a partnership in a warehousing business. The narrator reports:

> She gave him a long look, her face going hard in a way I had never before noticed in her. Of course, she said, it takes hard work to make a success of a thing like that, and Nick, well [...] Nick's face crumpled, and he looked down at the carpet, hanging his head (189).

This marital violence, purely on the emotional level, is a sad reflection on the marriages of Indian Diaspora. The cultural pulls and the stringent economic demands of the present-day world reduce many marriages into strained relationships.

While exploring the genesis of violence on the social level, Ghosh reveals that sometimes, the seeds of discord are sown, unconsciously, in the minds of the children by the parents themselves. In early January 1964, when the narrator as a young boy catches the bus to school, he notices that there were only a few boys, all sitting huddled together at the back of the bus. In a 'tearful, sing-song sound' (which the narrator can 'still remember' as an adult), a boy tells him that his mother did not

let him drink any water that morning because she had 'heard that they had poured poison into Tala tank, that the whole of Calcutta's water supply was poisoned' (199). There was no need to ask any questions. All the children knew who 'they' were. 'It was a reality that existed only in the saying, so when you heard it said, it did not matter whether you believed it or not [...] it only mattered that it had been said at all' (200).

The narrator is then accused of being a friend of the 'enemy.' His friend Montu is a Muslim. He saves his skin by lying. 'I haven't met Montu for months' (200) and he is once again included as being 'one of us.' A hollow relief follows denial and betrayal. 'I was very glad he hadn't come,' (200) says the narrator, spared as he is of any further embarrassment. As lines are drawn up to divide the society on purely religious lines, it is but natural that distrust, dissension and violence should vitiate the environment. There is no realization on the part of the narrator that he had betrayed his friend, no feeling of guilt, only relief that he belonged to the majority community. Just as, perhaps, Nick had felt when he ran home from school knowing that Ila would be attacked by a fellow English girl, he did not want to get embroiled in the quarrel, or even get noticed in her company.

Ghosh believes that the atmosphere of violence created by religious fundamentalism in India is chilling and fearful. When the 'enemy' is identified not as an outsider but as one living within one's own country, then the country can only be seen as going downhill.

We see such violence and chaos through the eyes of the uncomprehending, innocent children. Religious riots suddenly break out in Calcutta in free India. In their classroom, the children find it difficult to concentrate upon their lessons. Voices could be heard outside the window, quite different from the orderly roar of a demonstration.

> A shout followed by another and another, in a jaggedly random succession, and then, suddenly, silence, and just when they seemed to have died away, there they were, one voice, followed by a dozen, and then again a moment of silence (201).

The lines communicate the intense fear, the absolute terror. As the children hear the 'uniquely frightening [...] not elemental, not powerful [...] rather, a torn, ragged (sound)' outside, a child asks, 'Wonder who's batting?' (202) India was playing a Test match with England at Madras on that day. To the child, the cricket match at Madras and all the excitement associated with it was the sane world, the world he would rather belong to than the disordered world outside his classroom.

The children are caught in the middle of a communal violence on their way home from school. Ghosh does not describe the scene outside the school like a voyeur (the shops were shut, the streets were empty, the policemen were patrolling the streets) but to bring home the utter senselessness, the sheer insanity of mob fury. A group of boys on Park Street start racing after the bus. The children duck under their seats as stones are pelted against the windows. The bus picks up speed and leaves the attackers behind. 'When we got up and looked back, some of them were laughing, with their arms around each other's shoulders' (203).

The children are stupefied with fear as the world becomes disarranged before them. They realize that normalcy is 'utterly contingent' and that the street that one resides in may suddenly without any warning become dangerous and hostile any moment. As Ghosh states:

> It is this that sets 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 the fear of the war between oneself and one's image in the mirror (204).

Ghosh makes his final statement on violence while recounting the events leading up to the killing of Tridib, Jethamoshai and Khalil, the rickshaw-puller. The following song of John Lennon written in 1975 that stirred a generation might have inspired Amitav Ghosh, when he created the character of Tridib.

> *Imagine there's no countries*
> *It isn't hard to do*
> *Nothing to kill or die for*

And no religion too.
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace [...]
Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world [...]

Tridib, too, had dreamt of 'a better place, a place without borders and countries' (186). He was happiest in neutral, impersonal places — coffee houses, street corners — as though he did not seem to want to get too close to the people he associated with. A few weeks before his most tragic death at the hands of a mob in Dhaka, May sees an injured dog by the roadside and threatens to jump out of the moving car to come to its aid. 'Let it be, May,' Tridib pleaded. 'There's nothing we can do.' But May is shocked at his passivity. 'Can't you help a bit? she said. All you're good for is words. Can't you ever *do* anything?' (173). He assists in putting to death an already dying dog, to relieve it of its pain.

This scene is replicated as a mirror image in the last scene at Jindabahar Lane. When the dog had been put to death Tridib had told May that she should not hesitate to do the same for him if he were dying. When his time to die actually arrived, May, unintentionally, contributes to his death. There are too many ironies here — the ladies had gone to bring Jethamoshai 'home' from an alien country when, as far as he is concerned, he is already at home. He is looked after by a Muslim rickshaw-puller, who really cares for him and loves him and looks after him. Their tender, endearing relationship is symbolic of the possibility of Hindu-Muslim amity in spite of the political divide. In his younger days, Jethamoshai would not have tolerated the shadow of a Muslim anywhere near him. Now he trusts no one, but Khalil.

The rescue mission turns tragic as Khalil, Jethamoshai and Tridib are killed by a frenzied mob. The shadow of this tragedy

casts a gloom on all the characters in the novel for the rest of their lives. Robi, who was always keen to know what 'trouble' means, now finds himself troubled. He experiences a nightmare periodically. And May remains haunted by her earlier utterance: 'Can't you ever *do* anything?'

Tridib had gone on the trip to Dhaka merely because he wanted to be with May. May's visit to India was planned, not her trip to Dhaka. The rescue mission had gone to Jindabahar Lane after a chance acquaintance of Tha'mma had informed her that her uncle was alive and living in Dhaka. Again, it is a sheer chance that her brother-in-law, the Shaheb, is posted to Dhaka as a Councillor.

Further, there is no connection between Tridib, May and Tha'mma getting together in Calcutta to set off for Dhaka in early January 1964 and the incident of the theft of the Prophet's hair at the Hazratbal mosque in Srinagar. Yet Ghosh shows how these unconnected incidents across space and time get linked in the most haunting way.

The tragedy of Tridib is the central focus of the novel. His presence and his absence haunt the reader from the first page till the end when the mystery of his death gets unfolded. The absence of Tridib (and the violent manner of his death) is like an unexpressed sorrow, a silent pain, and a suppressed sob. When, finally, Ghosh talks about the killing of Tridib, violence is foregrounded, and we see the helplessness of the individual in the face of collective frenzy.

The novel shows how futile it is to draw lines and to expect people to stay within neatly drawn religious boundaries; and it shows that there is a thin line between life and death, unless we value life and care. The novel raises many political and ethical questions but over and above, there is hope. The tenderness and concern that the narrator feels for Tridib, Ila and his grandmother; the strength of the narrator's mother and her loving and caring attitude, the bonding and the affection between the Prices and the Datta-Chaudhris — these vignettes of hope and love endure throughout the novel.

Notes and References

1. Meenakshi Mukherjee, "Of Love, War and Empire," *The Hindu*, October 1, 2000.
2. Amitav Ghosh, "India's Search for Identity," *Times of India*, Sunday, December 30, 1990: 11.
3. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, "Recovery, Rupture, Resistance: Indian State and Abduction of Women During Partition," in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28, no. 17 (April 24, 1993): ws2.
4. Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines* (OUP, 1998).
5. For example, Santi and Suniti, two schoolgirls from Comilla, shot Magistrate Stevens to death in December 1931. In February 1932, Bina Das attempted to shoot the Governor of Bengal at the Calcutta University Convocation. In September 1932, Pritilata Waddedar, a Chittagong schoolteacher led fifteen men in a raid on the Chittagong Club. After injuring at least ten persons and killing one elderly European woman, Pritilata swallowed poison and died near the club.

6

Time and Space in *The Shadow Lines*

ARVIND CHOWDHARY

Time and space are two essential elements of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. In this essay, I shall try to investigate the nature of these elements; how they are created, and to what purpose.

I

As Ghosh's novel is located in a subjective consciousness, he rightly strikes a balance between time experienced subjectively and mechanical or scientific time. (Natural time, expressed in the form of the passing of seasons, the organic rhythms of growth and decay, etc. is conspicuously absent in his novel). It is a right kind of combination which allows Ghosh to locate his novel in a historical and geographical reality, and at the same time feel and understand with Auden that

> All our intuitions mock
> The formal logic of the clock.[1]

In other words, it lets him become aware of the richness of subjective experience, and enables him to weave and interweave a piece of 'virtual life' or 'virtual experience,'[2] which is liberated from time by memory and imagination.

II

E.M. Forster, while talking of the importance of the mechanical or clock-time, says that it is possible to deny time in

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our lives, 'but it is never possible for a novelist to deny time inside the fabric of his novel: he must cling, however lightly to the thread of his story, he must touch the interminable tapeworm, otherwise he becomes unintelligible [...].'[3] As a matter of fact, allegiance to 'life in time' or chronometrical time is inescapable, as the basis of all the novels is a story, and 'a story is a narrative of events arranged in time sequence.'[4] Taken in this light, Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* clings tenaciously to his story. It has a narrative which spans from 1939 to 1979, or even beyond. If we go strictly in terms of the clock-time, it begins in 1925. 'My father was born in Mandalay, in 1925. My grandmother used to take him back to Dhaka every year for a couple of months to stay with her parents' (124). But as a memory novel this is how it begins: 'In 1939, thirteen years before I was born, my father's aunt, Mayadebi, went to England with her husband and her son, Tridib.' It was a historically significant moment when the Second World War ravaged England. The novel, naturally, relates Tridib's boyhood experiences in wartime London. This may well be considered as the chronological beginning point of the novel. But it is a mistake to think that the novel 'ends essentially in 1964 with the eruption of a cycle of violence in India and Pakistan,'[5] when Tridib, too, was killed. The narrative ends when May has an insight into her tragic situation, in the form of an epiphany:

> 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. I know I can't understand it, I know I mustn't try, for any real sacrifice is a mystery [...].

There is enough textual evidence to support the fact that May experienced her epiphany in September, October 1979, which can be taken as the other end-point of the novel's[6] action.

III

But it does not mean that all the important and not-so-important happenings and events of the intervening period between the two end-points have been recorded in the novel.

For such a record of times, we have to turn to history books and chronicles, where facts of all kinds are presented in a chronological order. Ghosh selects and organises only such material from history as serves his artistic purpose: which is to create a post-partition traumatic experience, in terms of the death of the narrator's mentor, Tridib, in a race riot — with life in England serving as its background, and life in India and East Pakistan, mainly, serving as its centrestage and foreground, simultaneously. It is this very painful and tragic experience which colours and affects the personal and social lives of the characters — notably, of May, Robi, the narrator and the grandmother. And those who are not immediately affected by his death, say, Ila, serve as a foil to that extraordinary character. Even the times, which Tridib spent in England and India, get interwoven into the fabric of the novel. They enter the novel as the recollections of the narrator and the other characters, of the close conversations they had with Tridib and the photographs he had shown them of England's finest hour.

This 'experiential life' is what Susanne Langer calls the 'virtual life,' which is 'the primary illusion'[7] of all literary art. It may be created out of personal or collective memory (as is the case in Ghosh's novel), or out of imagination, but what is important about such life is, that it is presented 'in the mode typified by memory,'[8] the mode of completed experience or of the past. That should explain why the normal tense of literary narration is the past tense,[9] says Langer; and so it is of Ghosh's novel for the most part. But Ghosh also uses the present tense to create certain experiences, which seem to emerge with a completely unchronological freshness, as if they happened 'now.' Take for instance, Robi's vivid and detailed account of his dream regarding his brother's killing by a rioting mob, as told to the narrator and Ila. Though Robi has been experiencing the dream almost periodically, it has not lost the immediacy of an intense experience, and is rightly narrated in the present tense. As against this, May's short but vivid account of Tridib's death appears in the past tense. Both the instances demonstrate literary uses of tense[10] to create a completely experienced reality.

The 'virtual life' is composed of such emotionally significant

events. It is 'always a self-contained form, a unit of experience, in which every element is organically related to every other.'[11] Though memory is a great organiser of consciousness, and as Whitehead says, it is something 'formed and fixed,' yet it lacks the 'unity' of the 'virtual past' or 'virtual memory,' which is created through the fabric of a literary piece. The past which literature engenders is 'experiential through and through,' whereas, there are 'non-experiential' factors in our experience of actual past.[12] The whole point and purpose of this little discussion is to indicate that, whereas our apprehensions of time and space and the forces that we encounter and contend with, are vague and fragmentary, the 'life' that is created in a literary piece is much more evaluated and perceivable.

The details in Ghosh's novel are organically inter-related, so that they get inextricably blended with the rest of the novel. In the light of this, I may, now, briefly, comment upon the beginning and the ending of the novel. When Tridib went to England in 1939, accompanied by his parents, it was a significant event in the sense that we are not allowed to forget it in the novel. England then was witnessing its finest hour. Even though it was war-affected, 'people were becoming friendlier,' Mayadebi noticed. It is a created element because its atmosphere, *i.e.*, 'England coming alive' (66) is contrasted with the 'euphoria' that had died down as they painfully realised that the Chinese army had driven the Indian army back (220). Similarly, it can be established through analysis, that the ending — which is 'the intense moment of personal experience' in which ordinary time is transcended, is inevitable, as it is closely related to other details in the novel. Such cohesiveness of events one can find in all successful fiction — certainly not in actual life, even in personal history or actual memory.[13]

Let me now come to 'the sense of time,' which the novel creates as 'the secondary illusion.' This unique literary phenomenon has been pointed out by Clive Bell in the context of Proust's famous novel, *'A la Recherche du Temps Perdu.'* Commenting upon the form of his novel, Bell says: 'Proust tries our patience so long as we expect history to more forward: that not being the direction in which it is intended to move [...]. It is

in states, not action that he deals. The movement is that of an expanding flower or insect [...]. Proust does not get forward, we complain. Why should he? Is there no other development in the universe?'[14]

Though comparisons are odious, and we cannot and should not place Ghosh in the same category as Proust, still this criticism of Proust's novel can be extended to Ghosh's novel as well, without much reservation. Ghosh's narrative deals in states, primarily, and not action; it does not move forward much. We may say that, essentially, it moves in and around the past.

Returning to Proust, Susanne Langer comments upon this aspect of his literary merit thus. She says, 'Proust's notable trait is his feeling for time; time is not something he mentions, but something he creates for one's direct perception. It is a secondary illusion in his writings as space is in music [...].'[15]

Ghosh's *'The Shadow Lines,'* largely, measures up to this criticism. His characters exist in time, and in time they grow and develop; and the situations also unfold themselves in time. I may illustrate this with an example from the novel. Nick, for instance, grows and develops in the narrator's imagination over a period of time, in the past. All that the narrator's father could tell him was that Nick wanted to be like his grandfather Tresawsen. Subsequently, on the basis of what Tridib told him about Tresawsen, the narrator could conjecture that Nick, like his grandfather, wanted to travel around the world, 'to live in faraway places halfway round the globe, to walk through the streets of La Paz and Cairo.' Since the narrator himself wanted to travel around the world, he went on to think that he had found in Nick 'the kindred spirit' he had not been able to find among his friends (52). Thereafter, he learnt from Ila that Nick was bigger and better and in some ways more desirable'; and he believed Ila when she said: 'Nick looks sweet when his hair falls over his eyes; everyone says so' (50).

The narrator continued to cherish this image of Nick for three years before May shocked him with the true account of her brother: True, Nick's straw-coloured hair fell over his eyes, but he did not want to travel like his grandfather; he simply planned to become a chartered accountant; and that Nick was

not considerate or helpful to Ila when they studied in the same school in London. Rather, 'he was ashamed to be seen by his friends, walking home with an Indian' (76). In brief, what the narrator learnt from May was that Nick was not at all like them. And when the narrator met him seventeen years later, he noticed that 'most of his breadth lay in the thickness of his overcoat and that his head reached no higher up Robi's shoulder than did mine; and that 'he looked older than he thought.' It makes sense when the narrator told Nick: 'I'm not meeting you for the first time; I've grown up with you' (55).

IV

That brings us to the question of time-shift in Ghosh's novel. It is curious that the narrator undertakes a back and forth mental journey in time, and quickly reaches the other end of the time-span of the novel — touching upon few significant events of the period — in the course of the first ten pages of the novel. We may complain that Ghosh takes a frequent recourse to time-shift, or that the management of time in his novel is apparently wanton and arbitrary. But time-shift is a very useful technique which allows Ghosh 'to make connections of causality and irony between widely separated events.'[16] By way of illustration, we may mention two remote but closely connected events in the novel, namely, 'the made-up story' told by Tridib to his acquaintances at the street-corner *addas*, and the other incident being the narrator taking a special note of a particular picture of May, a copy of which she was privileged to send to Tridib. Now, in the light of the later incident, the 'fictitious' story sounds essentially true — Tridib loved May; they had exchanged photographs; and were he not killed in a race riot he could have had English connections through his marriage with May.

According to David Lodge, 'Time-shift is a very common effect in modern fiction, but usually it is naturalized, as the operation of memory, either in the representation of a character's stream-of-consciousness [...] or more formally, as the memoir or reminiscence of a character narrator [...].'[17] In *The Shadow Lines*, memory manifests itself, essentially, in the form of a

memoir or reminiscence — based on the narrator's own recollection of events, and his reporting of the other character's memories, though there are few representations of the narrator's or the other character's stream-of-consciousness as well in the novel. Take for instance, his reporting of an incident narrated by his grandmother, which related to her sister, Mayadebi. Mayadebi, we are told, had worked herself into a terrible panic because her son had chosen to fight a bully at the school. But that was how Mayadebi behaved even when they were students, she had told the narrator; and by sheer association of memory, the grandmother went on to recall a boy who had been with her in college in Dhaka: 'The shy bearded boy' who, it was discovered, had been a member of one of the secret terrorist societies since he was fourteen. He was, subsequently, arrested, tried and later deported to the infamous Cellular Gaol in the Andaman Islands. (Now, this is clearly an instance of a stream-of-consciousness in the novel, representing the grandmother's state of mind at a particular point of time, as reported by the narrator). After 'straying' into the memory lane for a while, the grandmother told the narrator, that after that incident whenever she and Mayadebi happened to walk past the *gali* in which the boy lived, and she would point out to it and tell the story, Maya would feel frightened every time. It is interesting to note that the narrative recoils from the idea of Maya being a fearful, timid person to involve itself again with the boy from the terrorist society — this time, in the form of a reverie: 'If only she had known, if only she had been working with him, she would have warned him somehow, she would have saved him [...]' (39).

V

Miriam Allott points out that when modern novelists resort to innovatory devices such as the abandonment of chronological sequence and the stream-of-consciousness method, their objective is to throw into relief those moments of heightened consciousness, called 'epiphanies,' 'which seem to take place in a dimension outside the time registered by the clock on the wall.'[18] Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* has two such timeless moments. One is, when the narrator perceives that the places called Dhaka and Calcutta 'were more closely bound to each

other after they had drawn their lines,' so much so that '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' (233). It is understood that these cities, lying in different nations, got 'bound' to each other through acts of violence, and through few humane acts of saving innocent lives. The other epiphany occurs at the end of the novel when the tyranny of time loses its hold upon May, and she is able to 'see' that Tridib 'gave himself up' or that he met a sacrificial death — a moment which she shares with the narrator. He too is glad to have a 'glimpse' into 'the redemptive mystery.' No satisfactory answers can be found for such sacrifices through intellection, but they redeem us. Such rare moments, truly, comprise 'life by values,' transcending 'life by the clock'; and they surely extend the boundaries of our emotional experience.

Critics and literary artists tell us that epiphanies emerge in the modern novels in response to 'the discordant age' in which we are living, and are inspired by the sense of 'the inseparableness of us from the past.'[19] One major discordance that is felt through the novel is violence masquerading as political freedom. Tridib was a victim of such violence. It took less than a moment for Tridib to be killed by the rioting mob. But like the 'sacred time' or cyclical time, the moment returns, though not so periodically. It was a moment, which was directly experienced by May, Robi, the grandmother and the others. All these characters re-experience it at different points of time. And it is imaginatively lived and experienced by the character-narrator, through the other character's painful reminiscences, and through his own determined effort to find meaning into it, and not let the significant moment 'vanish without trace.' It moves them, overwhelms them, and acts upon them. Take for instance, how adversely Robi is affected by it in a London restaurant:

> If freedom were possible, surely Tridib's death would have set me free. And yet, all it takes to set my hand shaking like a leaf, fifteen years later, thousands of miles away, at the other end of another continent, is a chance remark by a waiter in a restaurant (247).

VI

The shape and direction of the narrative of *The Shadow Lines* is largely determined by the memory of a traumatic experience of the past-partition era. The moment has the power to expand, and present itself as a rich experience to the consciousness. Ghosh recreates it, proportionately, by controlling the 'musical' or reading time[20] of the violent episode. The discrepancy between the 'contentual' and the reading time is quite obvious. In terms of time, it is less than a moment, but it has been dealt with in quite a few pages, and there are scores of pages devoted to its victim Tridib, and the times in which he lived. As against this, the narrative relating to the grandmother's married life of twelve years is foreshortened to just one page. We may say that as a literary artist, Ghosh 'gives the image and sense of certain things while keeping them subordinate to his plan, keeping them in relation to matters immediate and apparent, to give all the sense, in a word, without all the substance [...].'[21]

VII

Returning to the clock-time, I shall briefly, examine here how Ghosh pays his allegiance to 'The Father Time' in *The Shadow Lines*. His novel specifically mentions particular dates for the major events in his characters' lives: 'the narrator's father was born in Mandalay, in 1925; in 1935, the narrator's grandfather caught a chill while supervising the construction of culvert somewhere in the Arakan Hills and died of pneumonia; in 1939, the narrator's father's aunt Mayadebi proceeded to England, accompanied by her husband and her son Tridib; Tridib's ninth birthday fell on the 25th of September, 1940; in 1947, came partition, and Dhaka became the capital of East Pakistan; in 1959, when Tridib was twenty-seven and May nineteen. They had begun a long correspondence; 1962 was an exciting year for the narrator and his family, as his father became General Manager of his firm; on 27 December, 1963, two hundred and sixty-three years after it had been brought to Kashmir, the Mu-i-Mubarak disappeared from its place in the Hazratbal mosque; by the end of January 1964 the riots had faded away

from the pages of the newspapers; one day in the year 1965, more than one and a half years after her trip to Dhaka, the grandmother gave away the chain her husband had given her, to the war fund; the narrator went to England on a year's research grant from September 1978-September 1979 to collect material from the India Office Library ; one afternoon in 1979, soon after the narrator began work on his Ph.D., he went to attend a lecture in the Teen Murti House Library, where the speaker 'jogged' his and his friend's memories of India's war with China in 1962, and a discussion on the significance of that war, imperceptibly and suddenly, brought to his mind the no-less significant riots of 1964.

The above-listed mechanical time and the events in it clearly indicate that Ghosh is not afraid of a chasm in his created piece of 'history.' It needs to be mentioned that these important dates, of personal and national history, ultimately, point to the vagaries of mind or 'experiential' reality. It is interesting to note that the events after 1964 are seldom specifically dated, but are recalled in terms of years. To take just one example, the narrator met May in London for the 2nd time *after seventeen years.* As for the ending of the novel, 'the intense moment of personal experience,' as it has already been pointed out, ordinary time is transcended.

Ghosh's vigilant care for chronological accuracy is evident in establishing the relative ages of his characters, in giving essential information about successive generations in two families (one British and the other Indian) and in some cases even telling us the days and years of their birth, marriage and death.

Succession, flux, change — are aspects of time; and as time does not have a spatial form, the novelist has to take recourse to indicating them through the description of a place. Sometimes a mere mention of a place, in relation to its past location, can indicate change of times. Thus, Gole Park was once considered to be outside Calcutta; it was a far-flung area; but, as the city has expanded, the area is no more regarded as such. The change is made much more apparent through the *description* of the place itself: Nathu Chaube's paan-shop at Gole Park, as a

landmark, is still there, though Nathu Chaube has returned to Benares. But the area around the shop has changed. In the early sixties there were few cars in that area, and the narrator and his friends could play football on the streets, making way occasionally for bus number 9. But, presently, the area is so congested that one has to push through the throng of people, shoppers and traffic to make one's way.

VIII

As we know, time does not always flow uniformly: in excitement it seems to flow faster, in boredom it does not seem to flow at all. Ghosh has created such moments of experiential time in *The Shadow Lines*. For instance, 'The rehearsal seemed to go on for ever' for May at the Orchestra, when all that she wanted to do was to think about Tridib and his invitation for her to visit India. Another example is, when the narrator desperately wanting to communicate to May that he was coming for the dinner, 'hurled' himself down the stairs, 'burst' into the kitchen, and virtually 'snatched' the telephone out of somebody. His actions indicate that the time was running fast for him. But, then, the time seemed to have stopped suddenly, for he experienced as if 'an age seem to pass before I heard May's voice' (249). But the perfect example is, when the narrator's mother, in order to provide care and comfort to her exhausted husband at the end of a hectic day, modulates the volumes and harmonies of their house to a whisper, reminding us of a silent moment in a musical composition (127).

It is not merely that the characters experience time, they also talk about it. Thus, for the grandmother, 'time is not for wasting, it is for work,' and it grows 'mouldy' if it is not used. As Tridib does not use it properly, it 'stinks'[22] (4). But the narrator values the time spent with Tridib, as he had given him 'worlds to travel in' and 'eyes to see them with,' though Ila could not understand 'what those hours in Tridib's room had meant to him' (20). How could she when for her what mattered was the present?

For Ila the current was the real: it was as though she lived in a present which was an air lock in a canal, shut away

> from the tide waters of the past and the future by steel floodgates (30).

As Ila chose to see as little as was necessary to carry on with the business of living; also because she did not 'invent' what she saw, the reality passed her by. Tridib, on the other hand, could experience the reality as concretely in his imagination as Ila did through her senses, more so if anything, since to him 'experiences were permanently available in memories' (30). Guided by Tridib's wisdom, namely, that 'we could not see without inventing what we saw' (31), the narrator could reconstruct imaginatively the Solent Road, as it was ravaged by the Second World War — an experience that was lost to posterity; also he could recreate the old Dhaka on the basis of the fond recollection of the times his grandmother had spent there, and what Robi had told him about the place. And inspired by the example of his mentor, Tridib, who could partake of all times and all places, the narrator could construct a moment, outside the realm of time and space:

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

Such a conception of a moment, or better still 'mental space,' is *not* 'a far-reaching play of imagination,'[23] but is close to human reality, and bespeaks of the depth of experience. It complements the fictional time and space of the two stories that are inextricably blended into the structure of the novel.[24]

IX

That brings me to the point where I can talk of the treatment of space in *The Shadow Lines*. There are no 'neutral, impersonal places' as such in Amitav Ghosh's novel. Even coffeehouses, bars and street-corner *addas* assume a definite character. There

are the places 'where people come, talk and go away without expecting to know each other any further' (9). Such places have their 'uses.' For instance, Tridib uses 'that conversation-loving stretch of road between Gariahat and Gole Park' to distract himself (8).

But 'places' are used in subtler ways in Ghosh's novel. For instance, they are used to reveal the personality or psyche of the characters. To illustrate, the eerie emptiness in May's life is reflected by the way she arranges her room: the light and sound of a television-set — which is kept on all the time, fill up the room, but it also indicates that there is something seriously amiss in her life; so do the cushions casually thrown on the floor (16). Surely, it did not look like a room where visitors were often expected. Tridib's room is equally uninviting, but it reflects intellectual taste: 'an oddly monastic room — a naked light bulb, stacks of books, piled up like newspapers, on the floor, a couple of mats and pillions strewn around [...]' (174). However, Mrs. Price's large and spacious room looks rich and 'crowded' with furniture and things.

That places are no neutral, objective entities, but are meant to be experienced, is stated succinctly by Tridib thus: 'a place does not merely exist,' but 'it has to be invented in one's imagination' (21). For Ila, a place merely 'exists,' and is no more than a utility — as is brought out by the narrator's apt observation regarding himself and Ila in this regard: whereas, the narrator longed to visit Cairo, to 'see' the world's pointed arch in the mosque of Ibn Tulun and 'touch' the stones of Great Pyramid of Cheops, the Ladies were 'the fixed points in the shifting landscapes' of Ila's childhood. To her Cairo was no more than 'a place to piss in' and the underground 'a means of shifting venue'! (20-21). No wonder, if Tridib thought Ila to be in some ways a very limited person: 'although she had lived in many places, she had not travelled at all' (21). Likewise, the narrator opined that 'the places went past Ila in an illusory whirl of movement like those studio screens in old films which flash past the windows of speeding cars' (23). Interestingly, Ila had 'invented' some cities on the world map for the narrator in a

restricted, unimaginative way, 'not like those fairylands Tridib made up for you' (24).

But Tridib however, being an archaeologist would not be interested in fairylands. However, he wanted that people exercised their 'imagination with precision' (24) when it came to viewing places and things. Even Ila, under fear and apprehension, was forced to experience what it means to see a snake:

> [...] looking at the snake's head, she saw it more clearly than she'd ever seen anything before, with the telescopic clarity of absolute concentration. She could see its tiny eyes, the flaring nostrils at the end of the sharply pointed head, the tongue, no longer flickering drawn into the soft pink mouth in readiness, the fangs erect now, and dripping (27).

But, under normal circumstances, if Ila were to see the tail of a cat, she would think that she had seen it all, and shoo it away.

Using 'imagination with precision' did not merely mean looking at an object with full concentration, but, essentially, exploring its unrealised possibilities. Tridib had driven home this point to the young narrator thus:

> Did you notice that Ila's house had a sloping roof? — Thereby he wanted him to imagine, 'what it would be like to live under a sloping roof — no place to fly kites, nowhere to hide when one wanted to sulk, nowhere to shout across to one's friends (29).

It is ironic that Ila, who looked for the world of 'here and now,' found herself a very little space in it, as is evidenced by the photographs she possessed of her school days. They revealed that she was either unaccountably absent in the pictures, or was inconspicuous in them (22).

And it was unfortunate that not being rooted in Indian culture, she could not understand the concept of a *veranda* — a place which connected one to the outside world. As against hers, Tridib's concept of space was vast and comprehensive. He once told the narrator that one could never know anything except through 'a pure, painful and primitive desire,' which meant that one strove 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' (29). It was a kind of transcendental space, which partook of all times and all places — to which one could orient oneself, provided one desired keenly.

Ghosh also deals with mental spaces — which reflect the reality of our so-called real world. For instance, in the child Ila's conception, a house is incomplete if it does not have a 'baby' in it (71). However, 'a crazily tilted chest of drawers' would do for an office (72). But the adult mind looks at the world differently, as is borne out by the narrator's conception of it — the world, he realises to his chagrin, is too materialistic and pragmatic to accommodate the painful reality of his grandmother's death: 'She had always been too passionate a person to find a real place in my tidy late-bourgeois world, the world that I had inherited in which examinations were more important than death' (92). A similar mental space finds its expression through a vivid, descriptive account of the bleak, ghetto-like surroundings of his relative's dwelling, as seen from its long *veranda*-like corridor (23).

This perfect picture of penury and squalor 'invented by the narrator in his imagination, with its 'little clumps of shanties,' surrounded by sludge-choked pools, at the edges of which women washed utensils and scrubbed their children, and with figures dotted all over the slopes of a mound, picking up bits of rubble off it — was a 'landscape' which was palpably felt everywhere in their house. It was 'that landscape that lent the note of hysteria to my mother's voice when she drilled me for my examinations; it was to those slopes she pointed when she told me that if I didn't study hard I would end up there [...]' (133-34).

But Ghosh does not merely dabble in mental states; he associates places with actions of all kinds. Take for instance, Nick's pronouncement upon the life in Kuwait. 'There is nothing to do there,' he says, 'except drink and watch video films.' But, as May, rightly, points out to him, 'grandfather Tresawsen would have made a little more of Kuwait than you did' (58).

Ghosh is at his best for creating places, which are affected by violence, or even are remotely connected with it. Thus, a

particular *gali* in Dhaka — where a boy who was a member of a secret terrorist society lived, frightens Mayadebi every time she passes beside it, and she holds on to her elder sister's hand and hurries past that *gali*. And then there is a space outside a school in Calcutta, which gets changed suddenly from its peaceful, environ to 'the authentic sound of chaos' as the rioters come rushing there baying for innocent lives. In the wake of the imminent violence, the streets get totally transformed. The school children realise on their way back home that

> [...] something on those streets had changed in the couple of hours since we had last driven through them: we saw that street twice everyday, but now it seemed unfamiliar. The pavements, usually thronged with vendors and passers-by, were easily empty now — except for squads of patrolling policemen. All the shops were shut even the *pan*-stalls at the corners: none of us had ever seen those shut before (202).

In one such street a rickshaw stood inclined at an angle, eloquent of an intent, which they could not fathom. Was it meant to keep Muslims in and Hindus out? Surely, they felt disoriented in such space. Such a traumatic experience, when recalled, could force one to think 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' (204).

Ghosh equally well treats a place, which is affected by domestic discords. It is that part of the 'huge, lop-sided, step-pyramid' like house where the narrator's grandmother lived, as a child along with her parent's sister, uncle, aunt and her three cousins. When the quarrels in the family persisted, it had to be divided to pathetic limits:

> [...] The two brothers, insisting on their rights with a lawyer-like precision, demanded that the division be exact down to the minutest detail. When the wall was eventually built, they found that it had ploughed right through a couple of door-ways so that one could get through a couple of had also gone through a lavatory bisecting an old commode. The brothers even portioned their father's old nameplate.

> It was divided down the middle by a thin white line, and their names were inscribed on the two halves — of necessity in letters so tiny that nobody could read them (123).

Such family 'distances' do not ensure peace for the inhabitants of the house, rather they fill it up with 'eerie silence' and painful memories, so that even a well-meaning person like the narrator's grandmother would not like to visit it once she got married.

But rifts and distances, at the social and national levels, do not beget even uneasy solutions through the partition of the bigger nation-state, as violence does not get driven to the borders. The places called Dhaka and Calcutta, in the two independent states, do not drift apart and become the 'other' reality but flare up at the slightest pretext. The pattern of violence relates these places to each other as never before, so much so that each city was 'the inverted image of the other.' The narrator undertakes a voyage into this land, which exists 'outside space, an expanse without distances; a land of looking-glass events.' He is simply amazed to find that the border did not 'separate' these places, rather locked them into 'an irreversible symmetry,' as identical scenes of violence were witnessed on both sides, with few humane incidents of saving lives — that indicated a kind of 'indivisible sanity that binds people to each other independently of their governments.' The line acts like 'a looking-glass border' (233). The narrator's concept of distance, in terms of separateness, receives a severe jolt in the process. It was this irony that killed the protagonist of the novel, Tridib, and prompted the narrator to undertake this journey into the virtual space, and to learn a bewildering new meaning of distance. It is in the context of such space that the Middle English story narrated by Snipe to Tridib assumes importance — the sad story 'about a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman across — the seas.' The story could happen in any part of Europe, as Europe then was 'a place without borders and countries.' It is not as if the continent did not have distinct cultures, but then the entire land could partake of the essential reality. Tristan-and-Iseult story could happen everywhere. It will be erroneous to assume that Europe then had homogenous uniform space, but a space, which was not

divided and sub-divided by man-made borders and lines. It is to this ideal space that the protagonist of the novel, Tridib, wanted to return in his personal life. He wanted to meet his beloved, May, as a stranger, in a ruin. Rather, 'he wanted them to meet as the completest of strangers — strangers across the seas' in a ruin — which was a nearly-ideal place, 'without a past, without a history' — a place away from their relatives and friends, and virtually transcending the profane time and space.

As we know, Amitav Ghosh's novel weaves and interweaves a 'spatial form,' through a pattern of interconnected motifs such as nationalism, political freedom, personal freedom, etc. (This form can be perceived by 'reading over' or by carrying out 'spatial readings' of the novel.) Thus understood, the places, associated with these motifs, get cohesively organised in the fabric of the novel, such that the places in England provide a kind of perspective to the places in Dhaka and Calcutta.

X

One interesting question, which we ask with regard to the protagonist of a novel, is the process of change and growth (or decay) which he undergoes during the course of the novel. Surely, the character-narrator of Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* comes of age after his painstaking *a la recherche du temps perdu*,[25] through memory and imagination. By defamiliarising himself with the world in which his mentor Tridib lived, and died a sacrificial death in a riot, he makes himself aware of the consciousness of the times and its meaning for human existence. The traditional concepts of time and space, understood in terms of distances and divisions or borders, get questioned in the course of this journey into the past.

Notes and References

1. W.H. Auden, *New Year Letter*, Lines 440-41. (London: Faber and Faber, 1941). Cited by W.J. Harvey in *Character and The Novel* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), 105.
2. For the concepts of 'virtual life' or 'virtual experience' or 'illusion of life,' see Susanne K. Langer, Chapters 13 and 16 in *Feeling and Form* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953, Third impression 1963), 212-13 and 291.

PART II

10

Nationalism and the Question of Freedom in *The Shadow Lines*: A Gender Perspective

MEENAKSHI MALHOTRA

In this paper I use the category of gender to look at the crucial questions of freedom, nationalism and globalism in *The Shadow Lines*. Though my paper, primarily, deals with Nationalism and freedom, globalism as a concept enters the discussion as Ghosh interrogates the nation from the perspective of globality.

In the recent times, which have witnessed the collapse of different political blocks and nation states, nationalism has been discredited and reduced to an outmoded 'grand narrative' of history. It is a legacy of the colonial political heritage that has continued to trouble us: a legacy that post-colonial writing constantly seeks to dismantle and erase. Ghosh, likewise, in *The Shadow Lines*, through his interrogation of borders and boundaries, questions the relevance and continued validity of the concept of 'nationhood.'

In the text, Ghosh offers different attitudes to and competing versions of freedom. Thus, while the narrator's grandmother's idea of freedom is tied up with freedom *from* the colonial power and attaining nationhood, Ila's concept of freedom is, basically, a struggle for personal identity or a quest for personal freedom in a post-colonial, post-modern context.

As against these versions of freedom, the narrator's idea of freedom, under the influence of his mentor Tridib, assumes an

intellectual cast, so that he is able to perceive the shadow lines that intersect our lives — as individuals, as a community and as a nation. In the course of my essay, I want to develop these ideas of freedom and see how they help us in arriving at Ghosh's understanding of and attitude toward the complex question of nationalism.

I

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 realization that freedom can't be geo-politically defined or delimited.[1]

Though this criticism of the novel holds good for Tridib, the narrator and May, it is difficult to see how, with justification, it can be applied to Tha'mma, the unnamed narrator's grandmother and a major figure in *The Shadow Lines*. She thinks of freedom in terms of political freedom for the nation. Obviously, it means freedom *from* the colonial power: "I would have done anything to be free", even killed for it, she says.[2] Subscribing to a view of freedom forged in the crucible of violent anti-colonial struggle, she cannot see how Ila can seek her freedom by living in London, as she does not belong there. She believes that:

> 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 (77-78).

Borders to Tha'mma are absolute physical and tangible realities. As she plans to fly to Dhaka in 1964, she wonders whether she would be able to see the border between India and Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan) from the plane. When her son laughs at this and says, did she really think "The border was a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other, like it was in a school atlas", she muses:

> But surely there's something [...] if there aren't trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference then? What was it all for then — partition and all the killing and everything — if there isn't something in between? (151).

That Tha'mma's ideas are interrogated and undercut in the novel is quite obvious. What needs to be mentioned here is that her views on freedom and the nation, and her severe criticism of Ila's choices fit into the larger contemporary discourses of gender and nation. To be more precise, they are indicative of the uneasy relationship between overarching nationalisms and individual freedom(s) of its citizens, especially its women.

Tha'mma's brand of nationalism has been variously described as militant, primordial and ethnic by critics — terms which require some explanation and discussion. Theorists have characterized as ethnic or primordial, a nationalism that is based upon shared cultural traditions and a common inheritance from the past. They often consider it as backward-looking, and chauvinistic, on the one hand, and, civic and progressive, on the other, 'associated with a given territory, depending upon universalist political rights accorded within that territory, and forward looking.'[3] Though theorists have attempted to go beyond this dichotomy, it has, nevertheless, proved to be convenient for the analysis of kinds of nationalism.

In his article, "Are there Good and Bad Nationalisms", David Brown has pointed out the illiberal atavistic cast of ethno-cultural nationalism, and the progressive nature of 'civic' nationalism.[4] Now, in *The Home and The World* (1915), Tagore anticipates and projects the 'good' and 'bad' nationalisms into Nikhil and Sandip. Couching his criticism in the figure of the extremist Sandip, Tagore contrasts him with Nikhil the liberal humanist and 'civic' nationalist. This analogy I bring in to point out that both Tagore and Ghosh eschew cultural nationalism, the former from a realization of its divisive potential in a multi-cultural, multi-religious social context, the latter from the perspective of globality. Also, the surprising, common point in the texts is (considering that there is a period of over seventy

years separating the two novels), a similar role being played by women *vis-à-vis* the question of nationalism.

The nation has been described as 'Janus-faced,' one looking forward, one looking backward. In the context of the texts under discussion, while women are identified with the nations' 'backward look,' that is, its putative origins and traditions, men represent its modern aspect. As Anne McClintock puts it:

> The temporal anomaly within nationalism [...] nostalgia for the past, and the sloughing off of the past — is typically resolved by figuring the contradiction as a natural division of gender. Women are represented as the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition [...]. Men, by contrast, represent the progressive agent of national modernity.[5]

It is so since the relation between women and the nation is envisaged in familial terms. The 'backward look' encompasses women as mothers of the nation. Since the 'maternal image is a powerful one: it allows a particular group to identify itself in terms of an organic unit: the family.'[6]

In Tagore's *The Home and The World*, this symbolic identification between the mother and the nation is realized in the character of Bimla. Sandip — a militant nationalist deifies her as the iconic 'Devi' and the symbol of the motherland, before the latter exploits her by embezzling her funds. In a similar vein, Tha'mma, brought up on the stories and actual experience of revolutionary terrorism, uses the words 'blood,' 'father,' 'brother,' 'killing' while talking about the nation. But the innocuous actions of this fiery nationalist contribute to personal tragedy. Further her severe censure of her grandson because of his attraction of Ila, and her indictment of Ila as a 'greedy little slut' (79) portray a limited and biased mindset. But, unlike Sandip, she is the victim of her own actions, as she is deeply affected by them. She is one of the 'traumatized' women in the novel. As Suvir Kaul states, that Ila in particular, but also Tha'mma and May 'are represented as carrying the greatest burden of historical dislocation.' And he continues by saying that, '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.'[7]

II

Feminist theorists on women and nationalism also point to the fact that women are made to bear the burden of cultural tradition, which also exerts pressure on them to be exemplars of virtue. This has been pointed out by Nira Yuval Davis in *Gender and Nation* (1997) thus:

> The burden of representation on women of the collectivity's identity and future destiny has also brought about the construction of women as the bearers of collectivity's honour.[8]

It is this burden of representation that Ila seeks to escape. In the nightclub scene where Robi enforces appropriate female behaviour on her, she tells the narrator that she has chosen to live in London to be 'free of your bloody culture and free of all of you' (88-89). However, Ila's notion of freedom is undercut by the narrator and Tha'mma, as well as by the consequences of Ila's own choices, later in the narrative. Ila's attempt to free herself from the cultural burden of Indian womanhood meets with failure, as, even while staying abroad, she is caught in other people's inventions. Thus, when the narrator half-jokingly imagines Nick's misdemeanors, she bursts out:

> Could I ever have imagined, she said, that I, Ila Datta Chaudhari, 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? (187)

Ila's situation is the result of a failed cosmopolitanism. She does not fit in either the restrictive upper class Bengali society, or in the easy and casual promiscuity of her society in London, though she is viewed by her group exotically as 'our own upper-class Asian Marxist' (97). None of her aspirations, namely, her fond hope of winning Nick's loyalty to herself and her attempted identification with European culture, get realized. Her supposed superior and privileged position as the inheritor of a tradition of radical struggle from Tresawsen and his friends, and her

confident assumption of being a dominant actor, in the future, on the world's political scene, are undercut by the narrator (104-5). Her assertion that nothing really important happens in that part of the world to which the narrator belongs — except famines, riots and disasters, is a limited Eurocentric view.

Ila's own experience of racism belies her statements about her 'free' state. And when she condemns Tha'mma as a fascist, Ila, it is implied, views Europe as a group of free states, upholding an ideal 'civic' nationalism — a society where anyone can 'integrate into the common culture, regardless of race or colour.'[9] The fact that European nation states were originally constructed on the basis of race, religion and language escapes her.[10] This evasion of history deludes her and finally renders her unfree; ironically, if any thing, it leads her into a deep bondage, as is borne out by her experiences in London. It is unbelievable that 'free woman and free spirit' is willing to remain bound to Nick, in spite of his disloyalty towards her.

III

May Price is the only woman whose journey towards freedom is posited as real and also endorsed by the narrator, in sharp contrast to Ila's and Thamma's illusory freedom seeking ventures. Even though she is an English woman, she has the courage to look back on the Empire and speak. Take for instance, her criticism of that 'worthless bit of England' — a large table which Tridib's grandfather had bought on his first visit to London and got it shipped to Calcutta, where it lay unused in a room. She is filled with indignation when she sees it and expresses her strong disapproval of it saying: 'I wonder how many roofs that money would have bought for those huts we saw on our way here' (48). Again, she cannot stand the sight of the Victoria Memorial. 'It shouldn't be here, she blurted out. It's an act of violence. It is obscene' (170).

Her observations reveal a breadth of mind and a special ability to empathize with others — qualities that set her apart from the other women characters in the novel. But when she brings to bear these qualities on such a volatile situation as a riot, she appears to be behaving in a Quixotic manner. Her

stepping out of the car to rescue the old man in a riotous situation, is a false step, which prompts Tridib to follow suit and it costs him his life. She holds herself responsible for his death: 'your grandmother [...] said, I'd get everyone killed. I didn't listen; I was a heroine' (250).

May traverses a guilt-ridden tortuous path for seventeen long years. In the meantime, she lives a self-abnegating, austere life and works for global relief agencies, like Amnesty and Oxfam. Eventually, she reaches the realization that she did not cause Tridib's death and that he died with full knowledge of the grave consequences of his action, he 'gave himself up, it was a sacrifice' (252). With this realization, which she gladly shares with the narrator, she is relatively free.

IV

For the grandmother's generation, as mentioned earlier, freedom remained tied to nationalism. Nationalism, however, has yielded a bloody harvest, and has hardly moved in a progressive direction.[11] The central theme of *The Shadow Lines*, therefore, is the need to go beyond nationalism if true freedom is to be sought. In the novel, the bearer of this internationalism is Tridib, and following him, the narrator of the novel himself.

Tridib, the second son of Mayadebi is a sensitive and intelligent eight-year old boy, who visits England during the outbreak of the Second World War. Tridib's varied experiences there initiate him to see imaginatively and not to be trapped, unthinkingly, into accepting other peoples' interpretations. Subsequently, it develops into a credo, a way of life, namely, 'using one's imagination with precision.' This is his legacy to the narrator : He wants him to look beyond competing master-narratives such as colonialism or nationalism. He makes him aware of the multifaceted nature of reality. It can be looked at from different perspectives; one has to 'invent' it in ones' imagination, so to speak. In order to drive home his viewpoint, Tridib asks the young narrator: 'Did you notice that Ila's house had a sloping roof?' (29) — a seemingly innocuous question that opens up new vistas to the child-narrator.

This apparently simple question is not merely meant to be

taken as a pointer to the different aspects of reality, but is suggestive of a view of reality which is superior to that of Ila's and her mother's. The latter, it is suggested, are too preoccupied with the banalities of day-to-day existence, and for them 'the world as it is' is a reality. Moreover, the question suggests that the spectatorial mode is decidedly the superior one. It is implied that the first person narrator, who speaks for the three generations of the extended family, and whose coming of age story encompasses the salient aspects of the life of the nation, is in a privileged position.

V

In her essay on 'Investigating Middle Class Subjectivity' in *The Shadow Lines*. Babli Gupta has pointed out the inevitable limitations, which result when 'a middle class transnational subjectivity' is made the exclusive agent for exploring themes as vast as the life of a nation and nationalism.[12] The Middle Class perspective, for all its advantages in representing the nation before an international audience, is an exclusionary one, as the working classes and the peasants, the oppressed and the poor, and women are left out. Though Tridib is socially mobile, he can hardly represent this wide spectrum. However, his death, which is a 'sacrifice' (252) achieves this, at a symbolic level.

Tridib's death is significant in that it shows him transcending race and class. He could have retreated to the protective cocoon of the car, but he decided to force his way into the mob, to rescue the old man and the others. Earlier, he had tried to rescue May by not letting her proceed towards the mob. But his end is replete with ironies : a spectator so far, Tridib is now an actor in his own tragedy; the pacifist who eschewed violence falls prey to it. For the grandmother, the moment of 'homecoming' turns out to be a moment of mourning.

Whether it happens in Ghosh's fictional world or in our world of diminished possibilities, one or more deaths hardly help in raising social conscience; at the most they affect the victim's immediate circle. The narrator is the one who is the most affected by the personal tragedy. He digs out the facts of a riot, which killed his mentor — facts, which were relegated to the past even by Tridib's own family members.

It is interesting to note that Tridib had expressed a longing to reach forth towards a transcendental kind of reality. He wanted to go beyond the limits of his mind to other times and other places — a kind of virtual place, where 'there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror' (29). By delineating Tridib in these terms Ghosh is advocating intellectual freedom.[13]

VI

Though this paper has attempted to deal with the problem of nationalism from the viewpoint of gender, it needs to be pointed out that Ghosh's treatment of nationalism is somewhat incomplete. For instance, it ignores the progressive and radical potential of nationalisms in newly emerging nations outside Europe and America. Ghosh divests even the best traditions of left politics (Tresawsen's 'proletarian internationalism') of any productive or lasting value. Ghosh's text can be finally taken as a timely warning about the dangers of ethnic nationalism and fundamentalism, sweeping India and the world even today.

Yet, for all his 'secular' perspective, *The Shadow Lines* embodies an implicit phallocentricity, which shows up in its conceptualization of women. The narrator openly denies Ila the privilege of inheriting Tresawsen's legacy of selfless action; that privilege is meant only for the visionary Tridib and the reflective unnamed narrator. The weight of the cultural baggage carried by the women in *The Shadow Lines*, excepting May — and that too, partly, denies them any capacity for selfless action. They are made the locus of the problematic aspects of militant nationalism.

Notes and References

1. Seema Bhaduri, "Of Shadows Lines and Freedom" in *The Shadow Lines: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Novy Kapadia (New Delhi: Asia Book Club, 2001), 223.
2. Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines* (New Delhi: OUP, 1995), 89. All references to the text are from this edition.
3. Tricia Cusack, "Janus and Gender: Women and the Nation's Backward Look", *Nations and Nationalism* 6(4), 2000: 542.

4. David Brown, "Are there Good and Bad Nationalisms," *Nations and Nationalism*, 1999, in Cusack, 543.
5. Anne McClintock (1993) in Tricia Cusack, *Janus and Gender*, 545-46.
6. Deniz Kandiyoti, "Women, Islam and the State" (1991) in Cusack, *Janus and Gender*, 546.
7. Suvir Kaul, "Separation Anxiety: Growing up Inter/National in *The Shadow Lines*" (New Delhi: OUP, 1995), 285.
8. Nira Davis Yuval, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage, 1997), 45.
9. Kymlicka, (1995) in T. Cusack, *Janus and Gender*, 542-43.
10,11. It is worthwhile to refer to Aizaz Ahmad's summing up here that: 'Nationalism itself is not some unitary thing with some predetermined essence and value. There are hundreds of nationalisms in Asia and Africa today; some are progressive, others are not. Whether a nationalism will produce a progressive cultural practice depends, in Gramscian terms, upon the political character of the power bloc which takes hold of it and utilizes it, as a material force, in the process of constituting its own hegemony,' Ahmad, A. *In Theory: Classes, Nations and Literatures* (Verso, 1992; OUP, 1994). According to David Miller in *Nationalism Reframed* (Camb: C.U.P., 1996) nationalism is a constitutive part of our personal identity. While Anthony Smith and other writers make the point that nationalism and ethnicity should not be conflated, there is a tendency to associate Western nations with 'civic-territorial' and Eastern nations with 'ethnic-genealogical.' This dichotomy, however, breaks down when confronted with nationalist politics in actual situations. A generally acceptable definition is the notion of an 'imagined community' constituted by belief.
12. Babli Gupta, "Investigating Middle Class Subjectivity in *The Shadow Lines*" in *Many Indias, Many Literatures* ed. Shormishtha Panja (Delhi: Worldview, 1999).
13. It is worthwhile to look at Robi's desire for freedom from the haunting memory of a gruesome act. His experiences as an IAS officer reinforce his feeling that the notion of freedom is a 'mirage' (247).

11

Lines and Their Shadows: A Reading of Gender Roles in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

ANGELIE MULTANI

This essay will attempt to draw attention to the ways in which gender is represented in the text *The Shadow Lines*. It will look at how both male and female roles are constructed in the text as well as how the reader is led to approach the text in certain ways which influence the meaning constructed. The reader is usually positioned as predominantly male; that is, in most texts, the reader is addressed in ways that assume that the reader is self-evidently male. This also leads us to certain ways of approaching the characters, whether male or female, with certain pre-conceived notions of gender and gender roles — that is to say, within certain mainstream definitions of gender attributes. This can be done through the introduction of various characters or through their descriptions, and also at the level of discourse. At this level, the analysis would examine the various situations that the characters are placed in and their reactions or responses to those situations.

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 ones for the female characters are those which have to be observed when the character is portrayed as an object to be seen.[1] The female character is thus immediately located outside

the reader and is projected through a male perspective, in a sense leading the reader to react to the female character in a sexually conditioned way. When Tridib initially talks about May at Gole Park, the first question that is asked is 'and what's she like? [...] Sexy?'[2]

May is then described in purely physical terms, fragmented and broken up — her hair, jaw, shoulders, smile and her blue eyes. Ila is also constantly described in terms of how she appears to the narrator — the clothes she wears, her hair, breasts, the movement of her body. Thus, both May and Ila are set into sexual references by the text itself, positioned as characters who must be approached through their sexual identities unlike the male characters who are approached through a bonding based on similarities (Tridib and the narrator, the narrator and Nick).

I

While reading *The Shadow Lines*, the reader is introduced to four of the main characters within the first four pages of the text itself — Tridib, the grandmother, Ila and, of course, the narrator himself. There is no open or overt indication that the narrator is male — we, as readers, presume this for various reasons. In the first place, the author is male, and the narration is in the first person. This leads to a certain tendency to blur the distinction between the author and the narrator, so the reader tends to act on the presumption that the narrator is male. Secondly, the narrative itself points us in this direction. The narrator identifies himself with his uncle Tridib, on the very first page of the text: 'I have come to believe that I was eight too when Tridib first talked to me about the journey. [...] In the end, since I had nothing to go on, I had decided he looked like me' (3).

The main characters of *The Shadow Lines* are the narrator, Tridib, Ila and the grandmother. Nick and May are significant characters who play a far more important role than the 'secondary' characters, but are not part of the primary narrative in quite the same way as the four first mentioned. The 'secondary' characters are the 'others' — the narrator's parents, Ila's parents, Mayadebi and the Shaheb, Robi and Mrs. Price.

All the characters are introduced in relation to the main protagonist, the consciousness which forms the centre of the narrative. 'Thirteen years before I was born, my father's aunt, Mayadebi, went to England with her husband and her son, Tridib' (3). The grandmother is also 'my grandmother,' and Ila is introduced as only indirectly related by blood with the narrator. 'Of Tridib's two brothers, Jatin kaku, the elder, who was two years older than Tridib, was an economist with the UN. He was always away too, somewhere in Africa or Southeast Asia, with his wife and his daughter Ila, who was my age' (6).

From a gender perspective, it is important to note that most of the male characters are introduced as professionals — Jatin kaku is an economist, Tridib's father a diplomat and the narrator's father is a junior executive. The only exception to this is Tridib, who is outside the framework of the 'normative' male. However, Tridib is also certified with a profession, but it is one that is conventionally seen as 'less masculine' — he is an academic. Although there is one female character in these introductory paragraphs who does have a profession — the grandmother — but it is mentioned only in passing. The narrator's mother is a 'housekeeper,' Ila a child, Mayadebi and aunt/wife/mother/sister. There is no special statement about the job that the grandmother has — as there is about the other jobs — she simply has a 'traditional' female occupation.

The family of the narrator is drawn and upheld as a model, a standard of 'normalcy' — unlike the other families mentioned in the introduction; they are culturally rooted, specifically located in a cultural milieu. 'In our flat all of us worked hard at whatever we did: my grandmother at her schoolmistressing; I at my homework, my mother at her housekeeping, my father at his job as a junior executive in a company which dealt with vulcanized rubber' (4). It is important to note that the only 'job' which is described in some detail is the 'main job,' that of the father.[3] We are told not only that he has a job, but also what his status is, (unlike the grandmother), where he works, and what the firm deals in. The narrator's nuclear family is also located very firmly in a middle class work ethic — everybody works hard at his or her respective job.

All the male characters, except Tridib, are constantly conscious of hierarchy and status. The Shaheb, Mayadebi's husband is uncomfortable talking to his relatives until he can assign a hierarchical position to his nephew and fit him into his 'own promotion scheme.' 'So you see, my father explained to my mother when he came back from his trip to Africa; that day when we went to their house in Raibajar he had given me parity with a third secretary' (41). The narrator's father is acutely aware of how he and his parents had to struggle in order to earn their place in the middle class world. The constant presence of the 'other side' of middle class gentility is a fact that the whole family is aware of. However, when the grandmother discovers the old relatives, her uncle's daughter-in-law's family, somehow it is all right for the women to visit, but not for the narrator. 'Turning to me he said: Stay here with me. I don't want you to go up there' (131).

All the 'secondary' characters fulfil their traditional roles. The narrator's mother is a 'good cook,' an obvious contrast to the grandmother who can only make 'leathery squiggles' for omelettes. The father is a hard working successful man, who provides for his family and is looked after by his wife, who 'naturally' becomes the number one priority as soon as he comes home. The 'other' men and women also fulfil all their traditional roles; they are the pillars of society whom Tridib and the narrator try to understand, gifted as they are, with a 'special imagination'; while Ila and the grandmother are the figures which threaten that fabric. Mrs. Price, Mayadebi, and the mother keep their homes safe for their children, while the men provide for them and support them. For instance, Robi is a traditional male — he is strong, atheletic and rooted in his culture. He is protective of the women and stands up for the underdog and earns his great-aunt's approval. He too, like the narrator's grandmother does not understand or approve of Ila's desire for 'freedom.' For both the characters, a young woman's desire for freedom can only be understood as sexual transgression, which must be curbed by the family/society.

II

The desire for freedom from time/space that is manifested through the character of Tridib

positive. Tridib is *one* of the most positive (if not the most positive) characters of the text. Throughtout the novel he is described as being a non-conventional male character — he is not physically strong, he is not a figure of action, he does not fit into any conventional category of a 'male hero.' The narrator, through his identification with Tridib established early on, also falls into the same unconventional category. As Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan points out in her essay. 'The Division of Experience in *The Shadow Lines*,' that the text 'reverses' the conventional gender characteristics of 'active-passive.' Traditionally, binary oppositions set up between male/female roles tend to associate the male with active, which is also positive. The female, conversely is usually viewed as passive, which is perceived as a negative quality. (Ila and the grandmother too are described in many ways as non-conventional females. This point will be taken up later in more detail in the next section.)

Both Tridib, and later the narrator, are outside the traditional male roles in terms of their character, obsessions as well as choice of profession. They are academics, researchers into the past, rooted in an oral history, taking delight in listening to and telling stories, which is a traditional female occupation. As Robin Lakoff states:

> Another group that has, ostensibly at least, taken itself out of the search for power and money is that of academic men. They are frequently viewed by other groups as analogous in some ways to women — they don't really work, they are supported in their frivolous pursuits by others, what they do doesn't really count in the real world, and so on.[4]

This condemnation is repeated by the grandmother *vis-à-vis* Tridib — 'He's a loafer and a wastrel, I would sometimes hear her saying to my parents; he doesn't do any proper work, lives off his father's money.' Although we are told that the grandmother had an 'inordinate respect' for academic work, Tridib doesn't earn any credit in her eyes — he is too 'irresponsible.'

Both the narrator and Tridib have a fascination for stories and for recreating the past. This quality more traditionally

associated with women empowers both the narrator and Tridib, and its absence in Ila becomes a negative marker of her lack of imagination, confining her, paradoxically to the conventional 'inner' or 'private' space assigned to women, while Tridib and the narrator have unlimited access to outer 'public' spaces. The narrator frequently takes Ila and others into the past, through his narration, attempting to create a link with the present. Ila, on the other hand, is completely disinterested in history, more concerned with the immediate, the present. The narrator and Tridib are thus able, through their imagination to break free not only of space but also of time, free to travel through countries they have never seen and time in which they have never lived. Ila, however, is a limited person due to her lack of imagination. She is bound to the inner private space of her own world.

III

As discussed earlier, Ghosh evaluates the 'passivity,' to use Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan's term, of the males in a positive light, while the active imagination of the female characters is seen as negative. Ila uses her imagination to create a fantasy life for herself — a life where she is popular, dates the best looking and most desirable boys in school and most importantly, Nick who is her hero, who is not ashamed of her race/colour, and one who saves her from bullies who are jealous of her.

Even as an adult, Ila creates an illusion, (ultimately self-defeating) of being worldly wise and sexually active, to disguise her 'true' life, to create a self which is more in tune with the image that the narrator had of her. She says:

> I wish it *were* like that, she said with a tired little shake of her head. I wish I could say to myself — why I used to do that kind of thing too, it doesn't mean anything. But I never did, you know. You see, you've never understood, you've always been taken in by the way I used to talk, when we were in college. I only talked like that to shock you, and because you seemed to expect it of me, somehow. I never did any of those things; I'm about as chaste, in my own way, as any woman you'll ever meet (188).

Ila says that part of the reason why she created that illusory impression was because the narrator seemed to expect it of her. It is this expectation; the slotting into a particular category that robs Ila of the freedom to choose her own identity, how much so ever she wants to run away, to be 'free.' As the narrator points out, Ila can never be free, for they are 'within each other.' As a woman, Ila is more constrained than either the narrator or Robi, the other 'two children of a free state.'

Apart from the illusions she creates (or attempts to create, because we are told that the narrator always suspected that she was hiding something) *vis-à-vis* her private life, Ila's politics are similarly limited to the realms of wishful thinking. She participates in discussions about revolutions and popular movements, but is almost powerless.

When Ila and the narrator play 'Houses' under the table in the old family house at Raibazar, Ila cannot fathom the need for a veranda. The narrator, for his own part cannot imagine a house without a veranda — 'otherwise how will we know what's going on outside?' (70). If we look at the text as reversing the traditional attributes of male/female, but nevertheless eventually valorising the male, through the characters of Tridib and the narrator, it is also possible to read this incident as pointing out the male desire to communicate, to be 'open,' while Ila remains, as always, confined to the 'private.' In her essay "Maps and Mirrors" in *The Shadow Lines*,'[5] Meenakshi Mukherjee refers to Ila's inability to understand the need for verandas and terraces. Professor Mukherjee interprets this as 'underlining the essential difference between the cousins.' She says 'Terraces and verandas are traditionally female spaces in our culture and Ila's inability to comprehend their importance may at a realistic level be attributed to her upbringing in other countries while at a metaphoric level it highlights her total self-absoption.'[6] If one looks at the reversal of 'positive' attributes of gender as delineated in *The Shadow Lines*, the rejection of 'traditional female spaces' by Ila and the openness of the male narrator to the spaces outside is perfectly consonant with the overall gender ideology that the text displays.

Despite the reality of Ila's travels all over the world, she

remains trapped in her own limitations — all the countries she has been to are identified by the location of 'the Ladies' in the airports. Ila remains bound, limited and enclosed while the narrator is able to perfectly re-trace steps that were taken years before in a country he has never visited.

Similarly, Tridib, is able to see everything in his mind's eye — a quality which the narrator envies and values: 'And still I knew that the sights Tridib saw in his imagination were infinitely more detailed, more precise than anything I would ever see [...]' (29). The grandmother, on the other hand, simply inverts everything that is not part of her reality — everything in her uncle's house was upside down. For all her passionate desire to be part of the freedom movement, she failed to recognize the student revolutionary who was in her class simply because he did not fit into the image she had of a revolutionary. 'She'd been expecting a huge man with burning eyes and a lion's mane of a beard, and there he was, all the while, sitting at the back of her class, sitting shyly by himself' (39).

The 'active' imagination of the grandmother actually does end in disastrous consequences. It is the grandmother who rules in the nuclear family of the narrator, and who is responsible for the renewal of contact with the past, that renewal which is not non-disruptive and comforting like Tridib's or the narator's, but which constructs the situation which destroys the old uncle as well as Tridib. In her desire to bring back her past, to re-join a branch of the family which had been torn asunder, (obviously, an impossible and non-desirable act) the grandmother's stubborn act ends up killing three men, all 'good,' 'passive' and 'benign.'

The grandmother has her own understanding of 'freedom' — she would be willing to die for freedom, to sacrifice everything for it. This understanding for a 'nationalist freedom' is another factor that sets her against Ila. The grandmother believes Ila has 'no right' to live in England, because it is the British who fought and died for their freedom and the privileges it brings, privileges which Ila has no right to enjoy. She condemns Ila's own desire for freedom as nothing but a desire for sexual freedom, one that automatically makes her a 'whore.'

However, the grandmother's desire to hold on to her own personal freedom, is misunderstood and becomes a cause for disharmony in the larger family. Largely, the grandmother also creates this disharmony herself; she herself has construed various slights as 'natural' outcomes of her conditioning. The narrator says,

> Usually when she spoke of them, it was to remind us that it was all very well for Uncle So and So to smile and grin at us whenever he saw us now, but we ought not to forget that he had been quick to turn the other way during her hard years. She chose to forget that it was she who, in the fierceness of her pride, had severed her connections with most of her relatives, and had refused to accept any help from them at all even from Mayadebi, her own sister (129).

This 'pride,' a desirable quality in men, is constructed as a negative one by the text; one, which is implicitly, criticized by the 'normative' woman — the mother and also by the narrative itself. Nick, the man who accepts 'help' from his wife's family is thus a 'weak' man, one to be pitied and who in some ways is almost justified in revenging himself through his infidelity to his wife, while the grandmother's refusal to accept help, even from her own sister is implicitly portrayed as a weak point in her character.

The roles played by the women characters are those of providing ways for the males to transcend or fall — May is 'responsible' for Tridib's death, also for Tridib's final redemption, sexually she is his 'love from across the seas,' his transcendence of borders, boundaries and history. May also allows the narrator a 'glimpse into the final sacrifice and redemption' of Tridib; and in the sexual union with May, May disappears but the narrator re-discovers Tridib and himself.

Ila who is in a position of power *vis-à-vis* the narrator is 'tamed' by Nick, through his infidelity. The hurt caused to Ila by Nick finally allows the narrator to overcome both Ila and Nick and in fact, as Suvir Kaul has remarked, he now includes Nick in his feeling of pathos for Ila, 'This unexpected act of homosocial fellowship derives from the narrator's continuing sense of Ila as

a disturbing figure of female power, able to unsettle and even deny male desires or comfort.'[7]

The grandmother is also a threatening figure, as is Ila. As Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan points out, she, is jealous of the love the narrator feels for Ila and contemptuous of Ila's idea of personal freedom (which contrasts with her own idea of 'nationalist' freedom), almost destroys her grandson's career by writing a letter to the Principal of his college, accusing the grandson of visiting prostitutes. The point that the narrator, does, in fact, visit prostitutes, is glossed over as ironic, but the gendering of the malicious act of writing the letter as an act of spiteful jealously and 'madness' is inescapable.

It is interesting, and then how Ghosh manages to reverse some of the traditional characteristics attributed to 'male' and 'female' roles. The reversal is apparent even in the most obvious traditionally 'male' characteristics — for instance, Ila, a female is openly applauded as 'braver' than the narrator:

> [...] I had been with Ila once, when she had come out of the hairdresser's shop, her hair all new and curled, and marched straight off to Brixton with her little crew of friends. To confront a gang of jack-booted racists armed with bicycle chains. As for me, I knew I would not have dared (105).

Despite this reversal, in the final analysis, it is the non-conventional male attributes which are valorized while some of the most fundamentally negative 'feminine' characteristics — jealousy, spite, destructive activity are reinforced through the representations of Ila and the grandmother. It is only one important female character, that of May Price, who stands outside this negativity. This is discussed in the next section.

IV

The woman who seems to straddle both worlds — the positive and negative, is May. May is crucial in the text, for she is the one who links Tridib and the narrator, after separating them, metaphorically and literally. She was Tridib's love — his 'own true love,' from 'across-the-seas.' She was the one who had 'stolen Tridib' from him:

> I was jealous, achingly jealous as only a child can be, because it had always been my unique privilege to understand Tridib, and that day at the Victoria Memorial I knew I had lost that privilege; somehow May had stolen it from me (170).

It is also May herself who finally reunites Tridib and the narrator — Robi also tells the story of Tridib's death, but Robi's telling is uniquely presented from his own perspective — it is a dream. It is May who narrates the details — baldly, in a matter of fact way. It is May who gives the narrator the glimpse into the 'final redemptive mystery.'

May embodies the qualities of a saviour, nurturer and a protector — she is politically active in a positive way, contrasting with Ila and the grandmother, compassionate, understanding. She is a 'good daughter,' 'good sister' who stands up for her brother even while explaining an indefensible act of cowardice, when Nick ran away because he was ashamed to be seen walking with an Indian: 'You shouldn't think too badly of him, May said. She was pleading with me now. He was very young, and at that age children want everyone to be alike' (76).

May is the only character who is 'alive' throughout the text, who lives up to all the exceptions of the narrator. She remains a positive character for the narrator from their very first meeting, in his childhood, right until the end, when she initiates him into manhood and the 'final redemptive mystery' of Tridib's death. May is also one of the few characters who takes responsibility for her action — she believed for a long time that she had killed Tridib, but eventually is 'mature' enough to give up that self-aggrandizing martyr's role. She accepts that Tridib 'gave himself up' — he sacrifices himself. It is this 'true' understanding of Tridib which finally raises May's account of Tridib's death over Robi's experience of it, and which unites the narrator and May.

V

The male characters of *The Shadow Lines* all in some way or the other make their peace with one another and with the world. The narrator finally feels an empathy even with Nick; a

male bonding brought about by the 'inverted' power relationship he sees enacted between Ila and Nick:

> Looking at him, I tried to think of the future, as it must have appeared to him: of helpless dependence coupled with despairing little acts of rebellion. I wanted to get up then and hold him, chest to chest, his shoulders to mine (189).

The 'despairing little acts of rebellion,' of course refer to Nick's infidelity to Ila, which is somehow justified by the 'helplessness' Nick is faced with, confronted as he is with his economic dependence on his wife.

The woman characters, on the contrary, find no similar peace — the grandmother dies lonely after sickness, a victim of her own middle-class work ethic — her grandson was not informed of her death because his parents did not want to disturb him as his exams were so close. Ila retreats into a masochistic relationship, a vicious cycle of hate and love and revenge based on lies and self-deception. After confronting Nick's infidelity, she exercises her economic power over him, then hides behind a façade of misunderstanding and reconciliation.

Throughout the text, Ghosh also represents the female characters as isolated from each other, either misunderstood or as perpetrators or victims of misunderstanding. The conventional 'sisterhood' of female bonding is non-existent, and instead the spirit of male 'brotherhood' dominates the novel. None of the women find comfort or solace with each other like the men do — Ila and the grandmother never got along, and the grandmother's last act is a poisonous one directed against her grandson and Ila. Ila doesn't understand May — they have nothing to do with each other. It is once again, only May, the 'outsider' who finds some measure of comfort with the narrator, but in that final union, whereas the narrator 'becomes Tridib' his uncle, May herself somehow disappears.

VI

A reading of the representation of gender in a text therefore looks at how both genders are represented, in terms of their

attitudes, characteristics and reactions to various situations. The inscribing of certain attributes, either 'negative' or 'positive' to gender roles does not have to be a conscious bias or position. Very often both authors and readers subconsciously or unconsciously subscribe to various mainstream notions of gender positions and roles, in ways that we assume are 'natural' or 'common-sense.' Uncovering the unconscious biases and political positions inscribed in these 'natural' roles however does help in uncovering the bias against women that seems to permeate even progressive and radical texts.

The narrative voice of *The Shadow Lines* is one that does seem to recognize and acknowledge its own biases and prejudices, however it remains privileged and seems to offer a definitive view of reality. The colouring of our reactions and perceptions of the characters is therefore almost inevitable. We see Ila and the grandmother, Tridib and May, and the entire structure of society through the eyes of the narrator, evaluating and accepting his point of view as sane, logical and sensitive. The alternative views of history and freedom provided by him give us invaluable insights into a different kind of 'maleness' and courage. However, the representation of the female characters and of the gendered behaviour and attitudes, which the text seems to implicitly portray, remain disturbing in all their implications.

Notes and References

1. Susan Mills, *Feminist Stylistics* (London: Routledge, 1995), 162.
2. Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, (Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1988), 11. All subsequent quotations from the text refer to this edition.
3. The grandmother's promotion from a school teacher to the headmistress of her school is mentioned casually, almost as a 'natural' progression in a career, not worthy of special mention. But the father's promotions, however insignificant, are duly communicated albeit through the grandmother, to the readers.
4. Robin Lakoff in an extract from "Language and Woman's Place, Dominance and Difference in Women's Linguistic Behaviour," in Deborah Cameron (ed.), *The Feminist Critique of Language — A Reader*, (London: Routledge, 1990), 228.
5. Meenakshi Mukherjee, "Maps and Mirrors: Co-ordinates of Meaning

in *The Shadow Lines*," Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, Educational Edition, (Delhi: OUP, 1995).

6. *Ibid.* 262.
7. Suvir Kaul, "Separation Anxiety: Growing up Inter/National in *The Shadow Lines*," *op. cit.* 275.

12

A Post-colonial Interpretation of *The Shadow Lines*

PROMILLA GARG

In her essay "Crossing *The Shadow Lines*," Silvia Albertazzi pays a glowing tribute to Amitav Ghosh when she says that *The Shadow Lines* is probably 'the most important fictional work to have appeared in South Asian literature in the last decade.' And she goes on to explain that it voices almost all post-colonial concerns of our period, namely, 'the search for identity, the need for independence and the difficult relationship with colonial culture, the rewriting of colonial past, an attempt at creating a new language and a new narrative form and the use of personal memory to understand communal past.'[1]

In my essay, I shall particularly deal with the issues of 'identity,' 'freedom' and 'cross-cultural interactions,' in the backdrop of communal violence. I shall try to understand the implications of these significant issues by analysing the attitudes and motives of both Indian and British characters in the novel, as they emerge in the context of different situations they are confronted with. Towards the end I shall also try to project a general scenario of post-colonial writers and try to see where Amitav Ghosh belongs.

In an essay published in 1995, Ghosh stated that he got inspiration to write this book from the anti-Sikh riots of '84 in Delhi. He says: 'It became a book not about any one event but about the meaning of such events and their effects on the individuals who live through them.'[2]

Against such a violent scenario and in the context of cross-cultural interactions, the author seems to express his own views through Tridib. He considers the world as 'a global village' of men and women where they should be trying to reach towards one another, irrespective of their culture and race. Like Fielding in Forster's *A Passage To India*, Tridib believes that it can best be done with goodwill and understanding. He does not revel in the ethnicity of India; instead, he invents the West for himself and for the boys from Calcutta streets through his imagination, and his childhood experience of staying with the Prices in London. But, later in the novel, when Tridib wrests initiative from May to save the old uncle of the grandmother in the riot-torn Dhaka, he unintentionally proves that his culture is not in any way less idealistic than the English culture. It will be a sad mistake to assume that the western culture can displace thousands of years of our Indian civilization, as it gets embodied, say, in a moment of greatness that Tridib clinched. Again, it is he who opened the world to the wondering eyes of the narrator and taught him to invent places through active imagination, reflecting the prophetic streak in him. His vision transcends the limitations of time and space, as he expects us to reach forth towards 'the other' — be it an aspect of physical reality or a human being. But, on yet another plane, Ghosh presents a limited vision in terms of higher middle-class people, who work in foreign missions and agencies and have contacts abroad. Some of these characters may seem to feel concerned for Indians — for instance, when 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. It creates the impression as if he is really interested in people's welfare. Unlike R.K. Narayan, the author's vision is not rooted in ethnic India. The novel is more a study of cross-cultural relationship between India and England than anything else.

I

The racist Empire stood on the presumption that 'humanity is not one,' while the post-colonial writers insisted that both belong to 'the same world and not absolutely other.'[3] Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* seems to conform to this view as his

protagonist Tridib, an Indian, falls in love with May; and Ila-again an Indian, marries Nick Price, an Englishman. The unnamed narrator, of course, is friendly with May.

The interaction between these characters reveals the aspirations, defeats and disillusions of the colonized people when they try to carve out their place in the world. The action of the novel revolves round these characters who, really, belong to the two worlds. In their case the barriers seem to be breaking, though there are problems also. For instance, Mrs. Price is very cordial towards Mayadebi's husband. She addresses him as the Shaheb. She welcomes the young narrator and Ila to her home, treating them as equals. And her children, May and Nick, associate with Indians, apparently without any self-conscious effort. Yet, this interface does not really bring happiness to most of them.

The anglicised gaze of the educated Indians like Ila, Tridib and the narrator points to the fact that independent India is culturally colonized still. The desire of the anglophils like Arun Mehra in Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* is to be construed as pursuing European plenitude. It is nothing but their ardent desire to own the coloniser's world. Arun Mehra exults over the joys of Hamley's Toy Shop; he claims to know its exact location on the Regent Street in London. When Haresh, the homegrown young man asks humbly when Mehras were last in the Imperial capital, it is discovered that they have never been there. Vikram Seth's satire on Mehra's exploits indicates the oriental's longing for its conquering other, though there is pathos in Arun's anglomania, which re-echoes in Tridib's and Ila's longing for the West. Even the young boys from Calcutta streets flock to Tridib to know more about the West. On one such occasion, he tells the boys at the street corner that he had been to London to meet his English relatives by marriage. As the boys were listening to him spellbound, the narrator shouts that Tridib was in Calcutta itself and that he had met him the other day in his room. Tridib like Arun remains unfazed and tells 'If you believe anything people will tell you, you deserve to be told any thing.'[4] Similarly, Ila tells the narrator about her sexual exploits in London to impress upon him that the West offers her a lot of

freedom. Later she laughs and tells him that she is as chaste as any other Indian girl of her age. Now, it is foolish on her part to ape the western manners and mannerisms and wear foreign dresses and dance to the sound of pop music, in the fond hope that it will guarantee her social recognition and acceptability in the English society.

The native's desire to own the colonizer's world is often accompanied by disowning the colonized world. To disown India, Ila shocks her people, particularly the grandmother by her western dresses, and, subsequently, she shocks Robi and the narrator by her uninhibited behaviour in a hotel in Calcutta, where she wanted to dance with a stranger. When her uncle Roby, does not permit her to do so, 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' (88).

Hegel's note on *Lordships and Bondage* indicates that human beings acquire identity and self-consciousness only through the recognition of the other. Each self has before it another self, in and through which it secures its identity. Initially, there is antagonism and enmity between these two confronting selves, as each aims at the cancellation and death of the other, while proper end requires that they shed these negative attitudes and get closer to each other. When the narrator in the novel tells Ila, 'you can't be free of me, because I am within you [...] just as you are within me' (89), he seems to be expressing an ideal position.

II

In post-colonial societies even the colonizer's attitude undergoes a change. They try to understand the colonized culture and take care not to offend those who subscribe to that culture. To illustrate this, we may cite the following incident. When May Price comes to Calcutta, she greets Tridib on the railway platform by hugging and kissing him, but she soon realises her mistake, as people around them jeer at them by chanting 'Once more.' It is good that she realizes the importance of the 'other.' But when she denounces Queen Victoria's statue exclaiming, 'It shouldn't be here [...] it is an act of violence. It

is obscene,' she seems to be expressing her sound conviction. When Tridib says, 'this is our ruin and this is where we meet' (170), he means that the 'ruin,' associated with Raj, will serve as their meeting place to promote love and understanding between them. When May was in Delhi, India frightened her. She did not understand it a bit and she reminded herself that she came to India out of curiosity, to know what lay beyond West Hampstead and not exclusively to meet Tridib. Subsequently, she realised that she was in love with him. But, despite her good intentions and best efforts, she is unable to understand the colonial psyche and brings disaster on Tridib, unwittingly.

The narrator's visit to England twenty years later shows that the English have changed. They try to please Indians by treating them as equals, even partying with them; still, the two cultures cannot really meet. Probably, multicultural and cross-border friendships are desirable, but we find that Ila's international contacts with the friends from her International school, particularly, with the adulterous Nick, cause humiliation and pain only.

III

The representation of the colonizer and the colonized in the post-colonial literature can be seen as an explication of Hegel's master-slave relationship. In Hegel's paradigm, the slave must turn away from the master to forge the meaning of his existence in labour. In *The Shadow Lines* the narrator returns to India after interacting with the West and understanding it better. Fanon believed that decolonization was a significant period in the history of any nation, which was a part of the European Empire. When the colonized people could not accept foreign values any longer, they started mocking their values, which had enabled the West to stay in power so long. The grandmother's anxiety in *The Shadow Lines* to protect her grandson from Ila's corrupting western influence is a case in point. She thinks that Ila is misguided and that she loves the west for wrong reasons (permissive culture and freedom to do whatever one likes, etc.). The grandmother admires the West for its spirit of nationalism, sacrifice and courage, which the younger generation fails to understand. The grandmother — when she is critical of the

western culture, echoes the voice of the 60's and early 70's, which is marked by anti-colonial sentiments, associated with international black consciousness. She wants India to achieve a cultural nationalism which would at once speak for and forge a national identity. To give a practical shape to her ideas, as the headmistress of her school, 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 that Indians eschewed their perverse and self-defeating longing for the European culture.

And yet, there was a contrasting trend — what, for the English, could be a course of pride and a confirmation of their great civilization became for the colonized a kind of yardstick to which they must conform. For instance, when Mary forces Tridib to help her in putting an end to the pain of a seriously injured dog by killing it, or when she goads Tridib to save the old uncle of Tha'mma in the charged atmosphere of the riots, she tries to display the superiority of western values. And she expects that Tridib would emulate her. But, while trying to emulate her, he gets killed. Or, shall we say, he embraced death on his own; 'it was a sacrifice.' But the fact is that the two cultures cannot meet, they remain apart. This post-colonial desire to assess one's own culture by the standards of the western culture is evident in the young narrator's effort to size himself up in relation to Nick Price in the 'mirror.'

The decolonised people, with all their complexities and traumas, caused by the protracted colonial rule can never meet the colonizer on equal terms. The colonized people try to associate with the erstwhile colonizer to boost their own ego and try to embrace their world, which seems to them not only glamourous but places them above the common natives. Basically, it is a desire to run away from a society, which is striving to define its own identity. The writer shows the futility of such efforts when Ila marries Nick Price, not for the express love of him but for the licence it will give her to live in London. Their union is stillborn, though she refuses to admit it even to herself. Similarly, Tridib's desire to love and marry May Price leads him to his untimely death.

IV

With the emergence of the new nation-states, the colonized show a tendency to forget the colonial past. They try to avoid any reference to the bullying and treachery of the colonizer throughout the rule of the Empire. The desire to forget the past in the post-colonial era is symptomatic of the colonized people's need to make a new start and to erase the painful memories of colonial subordination. Jameson feels that post-coloniality is actually an ability to successfully imagine and execute a decisive departure from the colonial past. Albert Memmi, a prominent Tunisian anti-colonial revolutionary, believed that we, in the colonial aftermath, are deluded if we think that a new world will magically emerge from the ruins of colonialism. Both Memmi and Edward Said insist that the colonial aftermath does not yield the end of colonialism, hence the self-willed historical amnesia. There is a deliberate unwillingness to remember what Homi Bhabha describes as 'painful and humiliating memory of history of a race and racism.'[5] It may be noted that in *The Shadow Lines* there is hardly any reference to the colonial India. Even while talking about the riots of Calcutta and Dhaka, in which Tridib lost his life, Ghosh does not talk about the partition of India which led to such riots, and he does not blame the colonial regime for the mess they created by partitioning India.

V

The Imperialists extolled their literature as great for its imputed power to convey universal values. 'The concept of universalism became a part of the technology of the Empire.' The post-colonial writers like Fanon and Achebe challenged this myth of universality for its basic (false) assumption that European culture symbolised universal values. They questioned the myth that when we talk of universal experience we talk of cultural responses that have been shaped by the western tradition. These writers questioned the cogency of such ideas and found them worthless, as they were contrary to the experience of the people. Fanon anticipates another condition beyond Imperialism and finds that, despite the shared experience of colonialism, the cultural realities of the post-colonial societies

may differ vastly. Most of the western critics ignore the cultural differences, as they are indifferent to the sensibilities of others. In this connection, I may cite the critic Mark Van Doren who thinks that great love stories have no time and place and that love is the most common theme of literature. Leslie Fiedlar challenged this by observing that there is at least one whole section of the world, where love story is virtually non-existent. Thus, he emphasizes the fact that what is universal for the Europeans might not be so for the post-colonial societies. Further, there is a lack of concern about death in European fiction. The European reader might miss the significance of death in the African novels. One wonders if two people as different as European and African will ever be able to appreciate fully one another's literature and understand it. What is true of life is no less true of fiction; and Amitav Ghosh's text says it, implicitly. Despite the fact that May is keen to understand India, she is unable to do so, and her effort brings only disaster. Ila's effort to be a part of the western civilization also meets with disaster.

To conclude, *The Shadow Lines* shows two types of postcolonial understanding. One is that of higher social elites like Mayadebi and the Shaheb, and, second, is that of characters like Ila who still live in close contact with the West. They do not have roots in the home country and want to be a part of the colonizer's world. Such characters have no desire even to think of the colonized world, they are happy imitating the West. Ila's mother, for instance, sits like 'Queen Victoria.' The grandmother, on the other hand, shows the other side of post-colonial understanding. She is enlightened and self-sufficient and ardently proud of being an Indian. She wants India to forge her own identity. Though she admires the nationalism and patriotism of the English, she feels it is time for Indians to act and achieve their own identity and not waste time in apeing the West.

The post-colonial writer is using the colonizer's ways — his language and culture. Despite his protests to the contrary, he knows that he can attract attention by clinging on to the colonial master's culture and bearings, and it is reflected in his writings

Is he not posturing when he claims that he is the voice of the voiceless natives? Is his whole endeavor not just a burning desire to impress his erstwhile colonial masters and be counted among the genuine spokesmen of the world culture? It is for this purpose that he combines the earthy nativity of the colonized and the high avant-garde savouries of the metropolitan cultural market place. Kwame Anthony Appiah says that such post-colonial writers 'meditate the trade of cultural commodities of the world capitalism at the periphery.'[6] Had he been writing in the colonized state, speaking of the colonized mind, he would not have just made his work look 'chic.' As for his complaints and protestations of the West, they are basically hollow because he knows that his value lies in not being embroiled in the rustic idiocies of tribalism, engendered by the shackled psyche of the colonized. Most of the time the post-colonial writer does not value life as it is actually lived; it has value for him only when it gets entangled and disentangled in relation to the West. He seems to write with a squinted eye, which is, consciously or unconsciously, aware of the hidden eye of the West.

Notes and References

1. Silvia Albertazzi, "Crossing *The Shadow Lines*," University of Bologna: http//w.w.w.lingue.unibo.it/postcolonial-studies-centre/postcolonial-linee d ombra. Htm.
2. Amitav Ghosh, "The Ghost of Mrs. Gandhi," *The New Yorker*, July 17, 1995.
3. Neil Kortenar, "How the Center is Made to Hold Things" in *Things Fall Apart, Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Michael Parker & Roger Starkey (London: Macmillan Press, 1995), 32.
4. Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines* (New Delhi: OUP, 1995), 12. Subsequent references are to the same edition, and are included in the parentheses.
5. Homi Bhabha, *Signs Taken for Wonders: The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), 174.
6. Kwame Anthony Appiah, in his book, *In My Father's House: Africa in The Philosphy of Culture* (London: Methuen, 1992).