

CROSS-GENDERED IMAGINATION

Amitav Ghosh: *The Shadow Lines*

The Shadow Lines (1988) (*TSL*) alludes to one of the classical texts of colonialism, Joseph Conrad's novella, *The Shadow - Line* (1917). Conrad's novella is about an invisible line that divides youth from maturity. The protagonist, a young naval officer, in crossing from the Orient to the West metaphorically crosses the shadow line into maturity. This metaphoric crossing also reflects in complex ways the opposition between the Orient and Europe. In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh complicates this 'classical' mapping of the world into East and West by dividing his novel into two parts, 'Going Away' and 'Coming Home'. The novel becomes a fictional critique of classical anthropology's model of discrete cultures and the associated ideology of nationalism.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) is arguably the pioneering Indian English text that challenges entrenched representation of nationalism in politics and literature. Rushdie departs from the convention of celebrating a dominant version of nationalist ideology, even though, the novelist does not touch upon people's experiences of events and other subaltern histories. Amitav Ghosh steps into and modifies the discursive

space opened up by Rushdie. *The Shadow Lines* is a critique of nationalism with a difference. It emerges in the text from the lived experiences of culturally rooted characters. As Nivedita Majumdar says:

In locating the critique of nationalism in an alternative view of history that itself is derived from the often-silenced voices of the nation, *The Shadow Lines* pitches the nation against Nationalism. (245)

Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* challenges the conventional portrayal of the nation as a unique entity. He considers the lines that demarcate nations as “shadowy” and unreal. Shadow lines appear not only between countries, but also between imagination and reality, the past and the present, memory and desire. The story is woven around two families, the Datta- Chaudhuris of Bengal and the Prices of London, spanning three generations. Written against the backdrop of the civil strife in post-Partition East Bengal and riot-hit Calcutta, it probes into private lives and public events that vie for validation.

It is through the recollection of an unnamed narrator that the narrative progresses. The two dominant persons who influence the child-narrator are his grandmother Tha'mma and uncle Tridib. They represent two antithetical principles by approaching reality in totally divergent ways. The grandmother represents a middle class world view deeply entrenched in a patriarchal

respective. Her morality and convictions are shaped by internalizing the rhetoric of the dominant patriarchal, nationalist culture. Her embrace of nationalism grows out of the insecurity she suffers in her life. Widowed at an early age, she has had to struggle through life in a hostile society. Her fiercely independent nature does not let her accept any kind of assistance from her close relatives. The 'status' that she has earned for herself through hard work as a school head-mistress has also to be safeguarded. She disapproves of her nephew Tridib and keeps him at a distance, because he defies most of her cherished principles. The narrator however is fascinated by Tridib's effortless challenge to his dominating, self-opinionated grandmother. The grandmother is overtly cautious about her territory and jealously guards her middle-class self image. Her nationalism gives her protection from imagined enemies across the border. She eulogises violence that supports the nationalist spirit. The grandmother's response to the notion of freedom and nationalism raises questions about the meaning and desirability of nationalism. Her narration of her personal memories of the terrorist movement in Bengal reveal her secret desire to have been part of the militant resistance to colonial power. Her concept of the nation is rendered in terms of baptism through bloodshed. In one of her harangues to the young narrator she even exhorts him to shed blood for his nation. She says:

It took those people a long time to build that country;
hundreds of years, of wars and bloodshed. Everyone

who lived 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 have drawn their borders with blood... War is their religion. That's what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood. That is what you have to do for India, don't you see? (TSL 77-78)

Tha'mma's sense of insecurity and fear of being dispossessed is evident in her frenzied espousal of violence for national unity. The view that she takes of nation-building is steeped in convention and symbolizes the dominant discourse. She speaks fervently of "their brother's blood and their father's blood and their son's blood." Nation-building is clearly a male business. What one finds here is Tha'mma echoing the age-old androcentric perspective – that it takes a man to wage war, shed blood and sink differences. She becomes the carrier of patriarchal views and hands them down, as it were, to progeny. In her capacity as the matriarch (ironically!) and as an intellectual guide to the younger generation in her capacity as teacher, Tha'mma is unconsciously injecting a patriarchal value system into the vulnerable mind of her grandson. The grandmother perceives an unmistakable link between an able physical body and a strong nation. The narrator recalls:

My cricket game was the one thing for which my grandmother never grudged me time away from my homework: on the contrary, she insisted that I run to the park by the Lake whether I wanted to or not. You can't build a strong country, without building a strong body.

(TSL 8)

The grandson narrator however, is more open to the liberal and rather revolutionary ideas of his uncle Tridib. Tridib subverts the illusory nationalism that Tha'mma builds up. He does it gently, with a great deal of tolerance and understanding. Tridib doesn't brand her a "fascist" as Ila her niece does. According to Tridib:

... she was only a modern middle-class woman ... All she wanted was a middle-class life in which, like the middle-classes the world over, she would thrive believing in the unity of nationhood and territory, of self-respect and national power: that was all she wanted – a modern middle-class life, a small thing that history had denied her in all fullness and for which she could never forgive it.

(TSL 78)

Tridib, unlike Ila, accepts Grandmother's worldview, casually, as something native and unassuming. The fact remains that this middle-class

desire for “self-respect and national power” has far-reaching, disastrous results.

Tha'mma also nurses romantic notions about partition/nationalism. She dreamily recalls an instance during her college days, when a young innocuous-looking “terrorist” was arrested and deported to the Cellular Gaol in the Andaman Islands. He had nearly completed all his preparations for his maiden mission of assassinating an English magistrate in Khulna district, when the police tracked him down. Grandmother “used to dream of him” (*TSL* 38). She used to be fascinated by the stories about terrorists and had longed to “work for them in a small way, steal a bit of their glory for herself. She would have been content to run errands for them, to cook their food, wash their clothes, anything” (*TSL* 39). Grandmother fantasized about how she would have worked with him, warned him, saved him and even become his accomplice in the attack years later, “forthright, unwavering”. She tells her grandson, “I would have killed him. It was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free” (*TSL* 39).

Tha'mma's militant nationalism is spectacular towards the end of her life. She donates all her jewels to the war fund. All her strength and energy are focused on assisting the military to wipe out the enemies. Though her seclusion is attributed to the after-shock of Tridib's death, patriotism tinged with violence becomes an obsession. In a frenzy of excitement she mutters:

“For your sake; for your freedom. We have to kill them before they kill us; we have to wipe them out” (*TSL* 237).

She is no pacifist, as one would expect a grandmother to be. On the contrary, she is determined to do her mite against the Pakistanis. In one of her crazed moods she pounds the radio and hurts her hand. The sight of blood goads her to donate it to the war fund again.

Despite grandmother’s vociferous espousal of a nationalist ideology, her own situation/identity is on slippery ground. She was born and brought up in East Bengal which became part of Pakistan in 1947. When she hears of her uncle still living in their ancestral home in Dakha, she is fired with a zeal to “rescue” him from an “alien country”. Strangely, grandmother’s homeland becomes the “alien country”. She finds herself in a total mess as she realizes that her Indian passport flaunted an alien city as her place of birth. “...she had not been able to quite understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality” (*TSL* 152). Used as she was to order and system in all that she did, she is bewildered at the mess-up in her own life. Matters get worse as she involuntarily says, “...I could come home to Dhaka whenever I wanted” (*TSL* 152). The young narrator is amused: “How could you have ‘come’ home to Dhaka? You don’t know the difference between coming and going!” (*TSL* 152). Grandmother is excited on her trip back “home” and changes her sari twice, feeling as nervous and shy as a bride. But

the moment she sets foot in her uncle, Jethamoshai's house she is fired with a kind of missionary zeal to rescue him from a strange country, infested with enemies and bring him back home, to safety, to India. Uncle Jethamoshai, on the other hand, is cynical about boundaries that politics draw. Sense breaks through his otherwise cloudy memory:

Once you start moving you never stop. That's what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: I don't believe in this India-Shindia. It's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? . . . As for me, I was born here and I'll die here. (TSL 215)

Three women characters hold sway over the events that unfold in the narrative: Tha'mma, May Price and Ila. They, in one way or the other, defy stereotyping. In fact, they acquire a sense of superiority over their male counterparts. They are strong personalities and influence the nameless narrator. Tha'mma, the matriarch, has come a long way from being an insecure widow who has had to fend for herself. What helps her cope with life are sheer will power, self-respect and undaunted courage. It is a tough, regimental lifestyle that she sets at home and expects each member to follow. She makes her own assessment of persons and places, and is guided by her

unique philosophy of life. Grandma's disapproval of Ila is a fall out of certain pet theories that the former nurses. Ila's cosmopolitan life-style and her westernized, liberal outlook do not fall in line with Tha'mma's ideas of national belonging. She is prejudiced against this freedom – loving, outspoken niece and dreads her narrator grandson's infatuation for her. As she lies weak and sick, grandmother calls Ila "a greedy little slut who had chosen to stay abroad for money". Tha'mma is also prejudiced against Tridib whose unconventional life-style she detests. She lays down the rules and demands unconditional obedience from her family. With the passage of time and changing fortunes, grandmother withdraws from active life, her "placental presence" withdraws, but continues to exert some sort of power over the family. Even after her demise, a letter reaches the narrator's college in Delhi warning the Dean of his wayward student whose movements need to be monitored. The letter just three lines long written in a shaky handwriting "unmistakably" his grandmother's states that the narrator had been visiting prostitutes "in houses of ill-repute" (*TSL* 93) and insists that he be either expelled or sent back to Calcutta. The narrator exclaims, "I was so shaken by the sight of her resurrected hand, reaching out to me after her death, as it had all through my childhood" (*TSL* 93).

May Price, for whose love Tridib yearns, does not fit into the mould of a conventional beauty. In Tridib's own words, ". . . she wasn't sexy, not in the ordinary way-she was thickset with broad shoulders and not very tall. She

wasn't beautiful or even pretty in the usual sense for she had a strong face and a square jaw" (*TSL* 15). Seventeen years later when the narrator meets her at a concert, he sees her "picking her way through the last stragglers, her shoulders rolling, like a boxer's." Even "her voice had a deep, gravelly, almost masculine texture" (*TSL* 15). May looms over the narrative as a superior being idolized by Tridib. Obviously Tridib is hopelessly in love with her. Tridib's confession of love in a letter to May brings her all the way to Calcutta. Standing before the Victoria Memorial they look into each other's eyes. The boy-narrator, seething with envy realizes that he was out of the world that they shared and that he had lost Tridib to May. Her stature grows after the incident during their trip to the Diamond Harbour, when May expertly releases a dying dog from despair. When Tridib watches helplessly dissuading her, she exclaims: "Can't you help a bit?.... All you're good for is words. Can't you ever do anything?" (*TSL* 175). Tridib's passivity, fear and complacency stand in sharp contrast to May's presence of mind and humanitarian actions.

The narrator recalls the incident of the cotton man when May paid him five Rupees for twanging on his single-stringed toy. May's simplicity wins the narrator's heart. He sees in May's curiosity "an innocence which set her apart from all the women (he) knew for it was not the innocence of ignorance but a forthright, unworldly kind of innocence, which (he) had never before

met in a woman” (*TSL* 169). She never displayed that “manipulative worldliness” which he found among the women in his family.

May, we are given to understand, is still coming to terms with Tridib’s death and her part in the bloody event. She is also not sure of her feelings for him. During those seventeen years she had been “trying to cope with that guilt” – of having jumped off the car to save Jethamoshai from the attackers, and being the reason directly/indirectly for Tridib following suit and falling a prey to the blood-thirsty mob. But it is May who leads the narrator out of his super imposed imaginary world into the light of reality. The night after Ila’s wedding, the narrator makes a pass at May, as though he is still living vicariously through Tridib. May handles the whole episode with remarkable maturity and goes on to describe her actual relationship with Tridib. By linking the dog episode with Tridib’s murder, May reveals the necessity of Tridib’s death. Tridib’s death now is equated to a sacrifice. This knowledge frees the narrator as much as it does May herself. This liberation gives the narrator a new lease of life.

The third woman who influences the narrator’s life is his cousin Ila whom he places on a pedestal and adores with his whole being. A globe-trotter, dare-devil and freedom – lover, she is a misfit in her own native soil. She rejects outright the "bloody culture" that is Indian and yearns to be free from it. Even as a little girl she displays extraordinary courage in the

underground room and reprimands the narrator. “Coward...Aren’t you meant to be a boy? Look at me: I’m not scared” (*TSL* 47). Ila's power over the narrator is amply revealed through his words of indignance at his mother's act of betrayal. She had,

made public, then and forever, the inequality of our needs; she had given Ila the knowledge of her power and she had left me defenceless; naked, in the face of that unthinkable, adult truth: that need is not transitive that one may need without oneself being needed. (*TSL* 44)

The narrator, however, is convinced of how they are linked together: “You can never be free of me . . . because I am within you....Just as you are within me” (*TSL* 89).

Ila sports a sense of superiority by pretending to be part of history and belittling India where “nothing really important ever happens” (*TSL* 104). To her famines, riots and disasters “are local things . . . not like revolution or anti-fascist wars, nothing that sets a political example to the world, nothing that’s really remembered” (*TSL* 104). She seems far removed from the narrator “in her serene confidence in the centrality and eloquence of her experience, in her quiet pity for the pettiness of lives like [the narrator’s] lived out in the silence of voiceless events in a backward world” (*TSL* 104). The

narrator loses Ila to Nick and his pangs of love for Ila are abruptly muted with her declaration. “You were always the brother I never had”. (*TSL* 111)

These powerful, strong willed women hedge in the narrator who surrenders to their dominating personalities. The nameless narrator lives vicariously, shifting between the others' perspectives. In a sense he achieves a pluralistic identity. Trying desperately to grasp the world of the others around him, he finds his own identity fragmented. His identity is a patch-work of different times and places crowded with ghosts from the past. A kaleidoscopic shifting of patterns takes place from time to time. As Kevin Jonas Lenfest states, “Much of his self-definition unsuccessful as well as successful, comes through the feminine others in the novel: Ila, May and even Tha'mma” (118). What one gets to witness is the construction of subjecthood through these vibrant female characters. The centrality of the narration lies in the narrator's developing consciousness- a consciousness that registers, records, participates, represents and recounts. The narrator- hero is a hero more in the structural rather than in the thematic context. His identity takes shape in and through his responses to the characters he engages with and the responses he elicits. Unnamed as he is, the narrator gets defined through his narrative. He is only the central point of reference- an unobtrusive participant and not an agent of influence or change, The narrator eludes description and one is left guessing as to how he looks. On the very first page of the novel he says:

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.

(*TSL* 3)

The Shadow Lines is a study in gender crossovers. If the women characters dominate and influence the narrator, Tridib is equally vital to the construction of the narrator's subjectivity. Tridib does not fit into any conventional category of a 'male hero'. He is more of a 'recluse'. As Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan points out in her essay, "The Division of Experience in *The Shadow Lines*", the text 'reverses' the conventional gender characteristics of 'active-passive'. Binary oppositions traditionally upholding the male and enfeebling the female are subverted. Tridib and the narrator are basically dreamers with a fascination for stories and for recreating the past. They break away from space and time through imagination. This enables them to travel freely through countries they have never seen and times in which they have never lived. It is Tridib who helps the narrator recognize the liberating power of the imagination. The narrator says:

Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with: she [Ila] who had been travelling around the world since she was a child, could never understand what those hours in Tridib's room had

meant to me, a boy who had never been more than a few
hundred miles from Calcutta. (TSL 20)

May Price is crucial to the text. She 'steals' Tridib from the narrator but finally unites them again. She initiates him into manhood and reveals to him the final redemptive mystery of Tridib's death.

The Shadow Lines is apparently concerned with history. The protagonist speaks of the war, what it did to people, of communal riots and their impact on individuals, of drawing borders and their aftermath. Ghosh's interest in researching into history and anthropology is widely known. The two central characters, the narrator and Tridib are both associated with these disciplines. In a conversation with Claire Chambers, Ghosh reiterates his interest in individual lives and the 'stories' they live in:

. . . when you're writing fiction in terms of history, I think it's important to acknowledge that a historical novel is like any other novel: essentially it's about people. Unless people's stories are interesting the history itself doesn't matter at all, it's only a backdrop. History is interesting to me because it creates specific predicaments, that are particular to that moment in time and nowhere else. So I'm interested in history to the

point that I can represent that predicament truthfully and accurately. (30)

It arguably follows that Ghosh's area of interest in the novel is not the historical significance of the second Partition or the incident related to Hazartbal nor the air raids in England. His concern is the lives of the Prices and the Datta-Chaudharys. The child narrator believes in the reality of space.

He says:

I believed that distance separates, that it is a corporeal substance; I believed in the reality of nation and borders; I believed that across the border there existed another reality. The only relationship my vocabulary permitted between those separate realities was war or friendship.

(*TSL* 219)

As the boy matures, the realization dawns on him that space and time are shadows. In the light of imagination they flee, leaving behind the essential experience of reality which is continuous and seamless. Despite its careful chronology and topology, *The Shadow Lines* "happens" in all places at once, ruling out possibilities of isolated spots of time or place. Erasure of boundaries is also the essence of the art of fiction. According to Ghosh, the novel affords the writer infinite freedom to explore people and places with a richness and sense of context. "I think what's appealing to me is that it

doesn't have any borders, you can really make it what you want." (Chambers 33). The free flow from one locale to another, from one time slot to another invests the narrative with a suppleness that comes from not being pinned down to restricting agendas and conventional frameworks.

The narrative undercuts history by juxtaposing it with memory - memory that can invent and create and in the process expose history as just another invention and not a given. Claude Levi - Strauss says:

The historian and the agent of history choose, sever and carve [historical events] up, for a truly total history would confront them with chaos . . . In so far as history aspires to meaning, it is doomed to select regions, periods, groups of men and individual in these groups and make them stand out as discontinuous figures, against the continuity barely good enough to be used as a backdrop. A truly total history would cancel itself out, its products would be naught... History is therefore never history, but history – for. (257)

Ghosh's novel foregrounds a history revealed through personal memory. Such a 'construction' of history is more authentic, at the same time, it exposes the fictive nature of received history. Tridib tells the narrator:

. . . we could not see without inventing what we saw, so at least we could try to do it properly. We had to try because the alternative wasn't blackness - it only meant that if we didn't try ourselves, we could never be free of other people's inventions. (TSL 31)

The narrative is an attempt to free oneself of other people's inventions - from the meta narratives that indoctrinate individuals.

In “The Heteroglossia of Home”, Sharmani Patricia Gabriel, makes an indepth study of Ghosh’s novel by linking Mikhail Bakhtin’s views on the othernesses present within a given linguistic and cultural system with Homi Bhabha’s ideas about the ambivalence of national identities. *The Shadow Lines* according to her, offers a critique of hegemonic construction of otherness and difference in formulations of “the nation” in the subcontinent. Ghosh, thus, is noticed to be committed to the dynamics of heteroglossia that rejects as separatist, inimical and self defeating, the binary logic inherent in the nationalist construction of boundaries during Partition. Gabriel recognizes heteroglossia as the motivating impulse behind Ghosh’s body of works. For Bakhtin, heteroglossia ensures that signs do not have fixed meanings; meaning in the inherently unstable domain of contestation, not the product of a finished or secure language. His view of heteroglossia is built on the concept of dialogue as conflictual foregrounding of the existence of “another

consciousness". The impetus to disturb the stable boundaries of nationalist discourse and the epicentrolological conception of cultures as fixed and homogenous systems is a recurrent motif in Ghosh's work. According to Gabriel,

it is the espousal of heteroglossia and its corollary of "routes", the practices of crossing, exchange, and interaction that enable him to conceive of natural and cultural systems as being in a dynamic state of change, mobility and movement. (42)

The construction and consolidation of difference is central to the idea of the borderline in nationalist discourse. The very idea of 'border' entails separating entities and the notion of binary opposition. *The Shadow Lines* rejects as separatist, inimical and ultimately self-defeating the binary logic in the nationalist construction of boundaries.

Crossings are made in the novel not just physically but also imaginatively across boundaries between Calcutta and London, between Calcutta and Dhaka. In the essay "Interrogating Identity," Homi Bhabha writes that "in the post-colonial text the problem of identity returns as a persistent questioning of the frame, the space of representation, where the image . . . is confronted with its difference, its other" (46). The narrative of *The Shadow Lines* dramatizes what Bhabha in the same essay describes as

“the otherness of the self” (44), where identity and difference exist not in a relationship of binary opposition but in a state of mutual construction. For Bhabha, the very site of national identification becomes a space of multivocality, contradiction and uncertainty, where identity is not a pre-given, stable, or whole, but divided by otherness within itself, always in a state of ambivalence. Ghosh’s representation of national identity as heteroglossic problematizes the unambivalent positioning of the other in the construction of national identity by dominant discourses. One of the key devices used in *The Shadow Lines* is the mirror image, which runs throughout the novel as a sign of those relations that paradoxically connect nations and individuals even as they divide them. The narrator begins to recognize each of the other characters – Tridib, Ila, Robi, Nick, Tha’mma-as his mirror image. Their images – their otherness define his identity. The mirror image foregrounds the idea of mutual contractedness also between the cities of London, Dhaka and Calcutta. The narrator comes to understand that “Muslim Dhaka” and “Hindu Calcutta” are essentially mirror images of each other, separated by a “looking glass border” (*TSL* 233).

The looking-glass metaphor is a particularly evocative one for the tenability of the diasporic imagination, locating the 'other' across the shadow line uncannily familiar and yet potentially antagonistic in its inversion. The narrator, as he sits in an exclusive library begins on his "strangest journey: a voyage into a land outside space, an expanse without distances, a land of

looking - glass events" (*TSL* 224). The cause of the riots that killed Tridib in Dhaka is also responsible for the Calcutta riots in which he was trapped as a child. He says, "I, in Calcutta, only had to look in the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment where each city was the inverted image of the other" (*TSL* 233). One of the chief concerns of Ghosh's novels is interrogating the idealized unities of nationalism and renarrating the nation in its heteroglossic complexity.

The Shadow Lines is also a critique of boundaries. Tha'mma, who puts all her faith in real borders and separate nations is perplexed to see that there is no border line between India and East Pakistan. "Where's the difference then?" she asks, "and if there is 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?" (*TSL* 15). The loss of her "special enchantment in lines" (*TSL* 233) gradually leads her to mental derangement. Her grandson, however, discovers that borderlines are culturally contingent. This fuels his imaginative understanding of nationalism.

Boundary lines also haunt the Bose family house in Dhaka. After the dividing wall is put up between the brothers' houses, Tha'mma invents stories about her uncles's house on the other side of the wall. The unseen side of the house becomes a daily source of fascination for the girls, gradually becoming known as the "upside-down house" (*TSL* 125). The principle of binary

division is evident here-the other portion of the home represents an inversion of the normality which Tha'mma's house stands for. But years later Tha'mma's visit to Jethamoshai reveals that his house is no different from hers. The futility and even irrationality of "othering" is thus exposed. Tridib can be seen to occupy a space of paradigmatic significance in the novel for his imagination enables him to think beyond the exclusion that officially sanctioned boundaries create. This desire to go beyond the confines of borderlines is crystallized in his yearning to play Tristan, "a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman-across the seas" (*TSL* 186).

The Shadow Lines can be read as destabilizing the fixed, binary logic imposed on notions of otherness, identity, history and memory in the construction of nationalist boundaries. If Ghosh articulates an exclusionary nationalism through the narrative of the grandmother who discovers its limits, through Tridib-as-Tristan by contrast, he exemplifies an other-oriented trajectory of that which goes beyond "the limits of one's mind to other times and other places" (*TSL* 29). In the process he forges an alternative paradigm of connections across and beyond the confining boundaries imposed by nationalistic discourse. Ghosh obviously formulates "a new, more fluid, frame work for national identity formation, one which interrogates the way in which differences are currently being polarized, set off against one another, in order to achieve the false unities of nationalism" (Gabriel 47-48).

The narrator's invective against rigid, polarized notions of nationhood and open embrace of differences, echoes the feminist tirade against patriarchal assumptions. Th'amma ironically supports and is at the same time a victim of conventionally 'handed down' convictions. She is absorbed into the majority that cannot see beyond boundaries. The narrator's consciousness, on the other hand, can transcend, even escape these strictures and look beyond. In subverting patriarchal conceptions the nameless narrator in the text becomes instrumental in offering a feminist perspective.

The Shadow Lines yields to a progressive feminist reading that perceives gender and reality as social construction that can be dismantled and reconstructed in new and more egalitarian ways. Laurie A Finke draws on the works of cultural critic Donna Haraway to elucidate feminism's need for "a politics of complexity." She uses complexity in a technical and evaluative sense. "Complexity" for Finke describes "a cultural poetics of indeterminacy, informed by contemporary theoretical debates in a variety of fields but without the political paralysis often attributed to post structuralism" (Finke 4). She turns to the cultural critiques of science to suggest a critical rhetoric for her argument since she is concerned with de-centering notions of objectivity and totalizing theory. She tries to appropriate aspects of dominant discourse to offer feminist theory a way out of the 'image of duration' – like nature / culture, mind / body, fact / fiction, real / artificial, objectivity / subjectivity, order / disorder. Haraway votes for a 'feminist theory of complexity' that

will help feminists think about how to move away from the production of universal, totalizing theory. She relates this to problems being posed in contemporary scientific thinking like nonlinear dynamics, information theory and fluid mechanics. These fields pose problems that cannot be solved by resorting to any simple principles of order or linear determinism. In Luce Irigaray's terms, they resist "adequate symbolization" signify "the powerlessness of logic to incorporate in its writing all the characteristic features of nature" (106-7). Finke while being aware of the divide between theories of science and literary criticism, sees the emergence of "disorder as a productive theoretical principle in the sciences – in chaos and information theory – as well as in such critical theories as deconstruction" (Finke 6).

Irigaray in "This sex which is not one" (1985) suggests that disorder and chaos constitute a threat to western economies of representation. Order is coercive because it is achieved through the exclusion, neutralization, or marginalization of whatever lies outside of artificially constructed 'norms', whether the norm is constructed as an electron, a human genome, or a ruling class. A theory of complexity is exactly the opposite of what physicists call a theory for everything (or TOE) which is a theory that is totalizing, universalizing. Even feminist literary theory is implicitly or explicitly modelled on the "rigour" and denotative clarity idealistically attributed to deterministic science and mathematics. Katherine Hayles notes, in *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* that in

both the postmodern sciences and in literary theory, the 1970s and 1980s brought “a break away from universalizing, totalizing perspectives and a move towards local, fractured systems and modes of analysis” (2). The move was toward theories of complexity. The theory of Complexity defied unified natures, exposing the “fictivity” or constructed nature of facts. One of the insights of chaos theory is that disorder is perhaps more productively conceived of as the presence of information. Complexity, as Hayles notes, insists on local application rather than global laws or principles. It can create the impetus to challenge hegemonic, totalizing instruction of self and society. Finke arrives at the conclusion that, firstly a feminist theory of complexity must be dialogic, double-voiced, in that its explorations of social and cultural phenomena be “half-ours, half-someone else’s (Bakhtin 345). Secondly:

History conceived of as an irresolvable tension between ‘what really happened’ and the multiple and dialogic narration about it, provide a means by which feminists might destabilize oppressive representation of gender and locate on the margins of discourse-in the “noise” of history-possibilities for more egalitarian cultural formations not yet even recognizable as representations.

(Finke 11)

Nivedita Bagchi in her essay on *The Shadow Lines* comments:

to reconstruct and rewrite Indian history is a manifestation of the desire to validate our experience in terms of western discipline. The narrator leaves us with the question of the possibility/impossibility of reconstructing our history along western (shadow) lines. He develops an intricate methodology to establish narrative validity and reconstruct history, only to finally undermine the West's craving for validity, chronology and order by taking recourse in a language that undermines the concept of chronology itself. (195-96)

The narrator's journey to recover the hidden history of the riots becomes significant. The riot that over the years had acquired a distinct place in the narrator's memory finds no significant mention in the newspapers or chronicles of that time. The narrator discovers the absence of a stable and coherent relationship between the documented voice and the mnemonic self that is, between the public chronicles and the personal recollections. He thus sees a connection between "my nightmare bus ride back from school and the events that befell Tridib and the others in Dhaka" (*TSL* 218). The separate stories of May and Robi help the narrative retrieve the hidden history of Tridib's death and the public chronicling of the event. The competing narratives enable the narrator to mediate between 'real' and 'fictional' histories. The child narrator who had believed in the 'reality of nations and borders' has

to relearn the meaning of the invisible 'shadow lines' that demarcate geographical and cultural space.

Ila's idea of history and her under-valuation of the local is thus contested:

. . . nothing really important ever happens where you are. . . well of course there are famines and riot and disasters . . . But those are local things after all - not like revolutions or antifascist wars, nothing that sets a political example to the world, nothing that's really remembered. (TSL 104)

The narrator feels alienated by "her serene confidence in the centrality and eloquence of her experience, in her quiet pity for the pettiness of lives like mine, lived out in the silence of voiceless events in a backward world" (TSL 104). It is the "silence of voiceless events" that finally gets articulated in the text.

In analysing *The Shadow Lines* the concept of Dialogic Feminism can be usefully deployed. A feminist theory of complexity can counter totalizing structuralist concepts. It facilitates a movement towards a non-linear and non-deterministic model of cultural analysis leading to an investigation of the specific, local and historical condition that govern discourse and culture. The dialogic insists on the local and particularistic nature of utterance.

The nameless narrator in *The Shadow Lines* transcends factual presentations of time and space. The narrator as child plays a pivotal role in the non-linear, multiperspective narrative. The movements back and forth in time (now the child, now the adult that criss cross) is not merely a structural device, but it serves to image a central theme that the dividing line between the past and present is only a shadow, that past and present are inseparable. Tridib teaches the narrator, when he is a child, to imagine – “to use [his] imagination with precision” (*TSL* 24). The narrator goes on to explain Tridib’s view of imagination:

He said to me once that 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, a longing for everything that was not in oneself, a torment of the flesh, that carried one beyond the limits of one’s mind to other times and other places, and even, if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one’s image in the mirror.

(*TSL* 24)

These childhood lessons equip the narrator to gain a novel perspective of reality. The narrator reveals how the communal riots that shook parts of Bengal and Dhaka opened up a new vision:

. . . I in Calcutta had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free-our looking glass border.

(*TSL* 238)

Tha'mma's rootedness to home and identity is challenged by Tridib, for whom home lacks fixed monoglossic meaning. The adult narrator, inspired by Tridib comes to understand that there is something more complex, and truer than the stable or 'rooted' reality of map points and cartographical symbols. The official discourse of national identity focuses on absolute boundaries, separations and divisions, imposing false notions of otherness and distance. Borderlines on the map are rejected as one-sided, static and distorted. We are thus initiated into a visualization of space that rejects the polarities of a world constructed out of "the tidy ordering of Euclidean space" (*TSL* 232). The re-mapping of the world's spaces can see Chiang Mai in Thailand as being closer to Calcutta than New Delhi, and Cheng du in China as being nearer than Srinagar.

Historiographers admit that history cannot give us any privileged access to "what really happened". They recognize that the historian's task is to divide the present from the past and make order and meaning out of the chaos presented by the past and its discourse. Historians become selective in the midst of contested meaning to make order out of the "chaos" produced by multiple discourses. The entire exercise is a concerted attempt to keep chaos

at bay. But one of the crucial insights of Chaos theory is that chaos is not disorder and meaninglessness, but a form of complex information. The randomness of the information results from the inadequacy of our linear representation of historical narrative to comprehend or to represent, complexity. The conception of history as a set of competing discourses and contested meanings, produces patterns that may be referred to as 'noise'. Michel Serres uses the term in this sense in his book. *Hermes : Literature, Science And Philosophy* (1982). Noise is information that is not in itself meaningful, that resists being coerced into meaning, but against which meaning must emerge. Noise is therefore central to any dialogic conception of history. Alice Jardine has suggested in *Gynesis: Configuration of Women and Modernity* (1985) that 'noise' in western history-that against which the meaning of western history has fashioned itself-has often been troped as the feminine. The space 'outside of' the conscious subject has always connoted the feminine in the history of western thought and every movement in alterity is a movement in to that female space, an attempt to give a place to that alterity within discourse involves a putting into discourse of 'woman' (114-115). Ghosh's text foregrounds that which has been defined as noise and then marginalized or excluded as non-meaningful to problematize that which has traditionally been considered 'true' or 'factual'.

The text also interrogates the imagined unity and coherence of the realist narrative. Time is experienced simultaneously with other times and places in the overlaying of the Calcutta of 1939 with the Calcutta of 1952 and

the England of 1939. The narrative moves from a London pub in 1981, the narrative present and the Calcutta of the 1950s and 1960s, when the narrator was a young school boy to the old house in Raibajar in the 1970s, then to London in 1939, at the outbreak of the second world war. The novel, thus constructs a heteroglossic national dynamic. This technique of overlaying times and spaces interrogates the process of narrativizing national identity through a neatly bounded, homogeneous and linear trajectory. Such a method of narration overtakes or by-passes the epistemology of binaries. *The Shadow Lines* thus moves towards the construction of an aesthetic that is based on a recognition of otherness. An alternative understanding of national identity draws upon the idea of Bhaktinian heteroglossia. Heteroglossia, built into the system of words and signs in complex and dynamic ways, subverts the core binary opposition of self and difference. It questions the attempt by hegemonic discourses to ideologically fix cultural meaning. Monologic fixity of national boundaries is thus challenged.

Amitav Ghosh's treatment of events – their time and locale, his perspective of political boundaries and division lines, his use of a fluid narratorial voice adequately position themselves in what may be termed 'noise' or 'alterity'. By foregrounding otherwise muted voices and letting the non-linear take an edge over the traditionally constant and accepted, the text plays down andocentric notions and re-inserts woman into the discursive space.