**Dissolving divides**

**Inter-weaving strands of memory and imagination.**

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**The Shadow Lines
By***Amitav Ghosh*Ravi Dayal Publishers
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Everyone lives in a story because stories are all there to live in, it was just a question of which one you choose." The young najrator of *The Shadow Lines,* who grows up during the course of the novel, inhabits a rich world of stories made up of a collage of different kinds of past - his own and other people's memories, the past evoked through sepia-tinted photographs, files of old newspapers and, above all, a past invented through a vivid imagination. But unlike a collage, which can be disjointed, the different segments of time and space described in the novel flow into one seamless narrative, continuous and absorbing.

The Calcutta where the narrator grew up in the early 1960s comes alive from a boy's point of view. The *addas* on the roadside steps around Gol Park and Gariahat are seen through thickets of trouser-legs. An aura of mystery attaches to the legendary hero of these *addas* - a typical Calcutta intellectual who speaks with equal confidence on East European jazz, the plays of Garcia Lorca and the behavioural differences between the Elapidae and Viperidae families of snakes.

This man is Tridib, the narrator's idol, who gave him the "world to travel in.and eyes to see them with". So much did Tridib extend the narrator's horizon, that years later when he goes to England to collect material for his Ph.D. thesis, he can accurately recreate the bombed London Tridib must have known in his childhood.

****Amitav Ghosh

If the bohemian Tridib is one pole of the boy's imaginative world, the opposite pole is his grandmother, who believes that if time is not used up, it rots and begins to stink. She emerges as one of the most memorable characters, not for the rigidity of her middle class values, but for the vulnerability beneath the surface that only her grandson can guess at.

The boy also conjures up from stories told by his grandmother a Dhaka he has never seen, precise in details of localities. They form "a part of my secret map of the world, a map of which only I know the keys and coordinates, but which was not for that reason any more imaginary than the code of a safe to a banker."

The third focus in the boy's life is his cousin II a, a girl of his own age who comes to Calcutta in between her father's UN postings to exotic cities like Bangkok, Madrid and Cairo. Wrenching the innocent boy into sudden adulthood, Ila grows into a beautiful and totally self-absorbed woman. If Tridib taught him to long for everything outside one's self, Ila epitomised the antithesis of such longing.

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| **Extract****One evening when we were sitting out in the garden she wanted to know whether she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane. When my father laughed and said, why, 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 was not so much offended as puzzled....My grandmother thought this over for a while and then she said: But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean where's the difference then? And if there's no difference, both sides will be the same... What was it all for then - Partition and all the killing and everything - if there isn't something in between?** |

She lived constantly in the present "which was like an airlock in a canal, shut away from the tide waters of the past and the future by steel floodgates". To her the variegated world was just a succession of departure lounges in neon-lit airports with toilets that are discreetly different.

Ila pities the provinciality of her Calcutta cousin. Yet the chinks in her armour of self-assurance are subtly evident through the lies she tells about her schoolmates, and later about her relationship with her English h usband. The narrator's aching and semi-articulated passion for Ila forms a poignant and marvellously controlled strand in the book.

There is subtle humour too. The grandmother, about to visit her childhood home in Dhaka many years after Partition, can only think of her journey as "coming". Her grandson teases her for not knowing the difference between coming and going.

The underlying critique is of the arbitrariness of all dividing lines - be it across an ancestral home partitioned through a doorway and a lavatory, or national boundaries, drawn in the hope that once the borders are etched on a map the two bits of land would sail away from each other. "It's a mirage; the whole thing is a mirage. How can anyone divide a memory?"

Three countries are interlocked in the narrative - East Pakistan (before it became Bangladesh), England, and India - and people of at least three religions impinge upon each others' lives. This novel is very much a text on our times, when human lives spill over from one country into another, where language and loyalties can't be contained in the tidy outlines of national frontiers. Funny episodes alternate with images of violence and decay - and the whole book is held together by haunting introspection about mirrors and maps.

A moving book, written with humour, tenderness and an understated intensity, *The Shadow Lines* achieves a transparent clarity through the deft balancing of a complex set of concerns. Not only are the lines dividing countries seen to be illusory; the gaps between the private world of memory and the public domain of history are also questioned and dissolved. For its luminous sincerity, more people will enjoy this book than *The Circle of Reason,* Ghosh's experimental first novel.