

**BRIDGING BOUNDARIES: AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES*****SK. KHAMAR JAHAN**Research Scholar (Ph D), J N T U H,
Hyderabad, Telangana State, India**Dr. S. PRAKASH RAO**Professor of English, PMV D and PG
College, Osmania University, A P, India**ABSTRACT**

Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines is an attempt to show the blurring of borders or lines. The natives of the colonized country become travelers who go to England, the country of their colonizers, whereas in a conventional colonial novel the westerners are made to travel to India. The political and social upheavals are not depicted in a straightforward manner in the novel but each of the characters lives through the emotional trauma that is a consequence of these happenings. The metaphor of travel is a means of bridging boundaries and bringing about cultural crossings. It is carried out throughout the entire time span covered by the novel and through all the characters. His characters move in so many directions and ultimately the identity of a distinct and discrete homeland becomes blurred. The world becomes one big home- the real home that lies in one's memory and consciousness away from all lines.

Keywords: Borders, travel, political, social, colonizer, colonized

Ghosh's novels occupy a unique place in the arena of post-colonial literature – they critique both globalization and post-colonial nationalism, by depicting the experiences of those in transition, those in between nation states, those going back and forth as travelers and migrants in search of lost homes and better lives.¹

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) is an attempt to show the blurring of borders or lines between East and West, castes and religious beliefs through an unconventional post-colonial novel that narrates the colonized travelling and moving to and from the colonizer's territory. But the instigation or the impetus to present such a world sans boundaries ironically comes through a personal experience of communal riots. An essay entitled *The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi* published in 1995 records Ghosh's personal experience of the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 in Delhi. He says:

Within a few months I started my novel, which I eventually called *The Shadow Lines*, a book that led me backwards in time, to earlier memories of riots, ones witnessed in childhood. It became a book about the meaning of such events and their effects on the individuals who live through them.²

The novel breaks the conventional type of narration in the very beginning. "In 1939, thirteen years before I was born, my father's aunt, Mayadebi went to England with her husband and son, Tridib."³ The natives of the colonized country become travelers who go to England, the country of their colonizers, whereas in a conventional colonial novel the westerners are made to travel to India. As Robert Dixon observes that the novel is different in its approach from conventional post-colonial novels.

The central fact of travel in this Indian family's experience immediately demands that we modify our expectations about Indian culture and the way it is depicted in English novels about the Raj. Furthermore, these Indians are going abroad in 1939, the year Britain declared war on Germany. Classical ethnography assumes that the culture of the western observer is a stable and coherent point, from which to observe native society. Ghosh undermines the notion by depicting Britain at war with Germany, so



that partition takes place against the background of an equally unstable Europe. The parallels between England and Germany and India and Pakistan-effectively undermine any distinction between East and West, colony and metropolis, and point to similarities and continuities that cut across these differences.⁴

The historical consciousness that the novel includes are the freedom movement in Bengal, the Second World War, the partition of India and the miasma of communal hatred breaking out into riots in East Pakistan (Now Bangladesh) after the *Hazratbal* shrine incident in Srinagar in 1964. These political and social upheavals are not depicted in a straightforward manner in the novel but each of the characters lives through the emotional trauma that is a consequence of these happenings. This traumatic experience is not limited to a particular community but engulfs characters irrespective of their geographical and social place in this world full of man-made divisions. The narrator's family is Hindus who fled from their home in Dhaka and Calcutta after the formation of East Pakistan. They become friends with the Prices, an English family, obliterating the cultural divide, and making the English family experience the horrors and participate in the very climactic event in the life of the Indian family.

The plot of the novel revolves around these two families the Datta Chaudhuris of Bengal and the Prices of London and the narrator's association with them. The lives of these two families are continuously intersecting and intertwining and the unnamed narrator weaves the various threads together. The metaphor of travel is a means of bridging boundaries and bringing about cultural crossings. It is carried out throughout the entire time span covered by the novel and through all the characters. The narrator's very eccentric uncle Tridib goes to London and lives with the Prices during the war. The anonymous narrator referred to 'I' throughout the narrative, is Tridib's alter ego and he also continues this pattern of dwelling in travel. The history of London comes alive to the narrator, through the stories Ila and Tridib. The people who play a significant role in the life of the narrator are his uncle Tridib, Ila, and his grandmother. But it's Tridib who exercises the greatest influence on the narrator and helps him evolve into adulthood where he discards all restricting boundaries and invents places in his own imagination. The political, regional and linguistic lines become blurred, as the narrator's memory become an organizing place. Even the lives of three generations of his family are woven together and equally are the three cities: Dhaka, Calcutta and London. "He does not inhabit a culture rooted in a single place, but a discursive space that flows across political and national boundaries, and even across generations in time."⁵

The metaphor of travel as a means of bridging boundaries and bringing about cultural crossings is carried out throughout the entire time span of the novel and through all the characters. Mrs. Price's father, who initiated the long relationship lived in India before independence, and is a type of travelling Englishman who left his home in Cornwall to travel widely in the Empire- in Malaysia, Fiji, Ceylon and finally Calcutta. The narrator's very eccentric uncle Tridib, went to London and lived with the Prices during the war. The tradition is followed by the narrator who also dwells in travel. In Ghosh's conception, border line is not a division that brings about a fundamental change in the identity of people on either side of the border. He gives the metaphor of the looking glass to these borderlines wherein the inhabitants sees its own image reflected in the land on the other side of the border. He confesses that he, "...believed in the reality of space. I believed that distance separates, that it is a corporeal substance; I believed in the reality of nations 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.”⁶ The looking glass events described here are the violent riots that erupted simultaneously in Calcutta and across the border in Dhaka over the stealing of Mui-I-Mubarak in Srinagar. The similarity of experiences combined with a history brings the people of the subcontinent together and keeps them bound in spite of geographical separation. The narrative shows how the borders of India and Pakistan see violence that destroys communities and displaces populations as refugees. As Ghosh writes: “They had drawn their borders, believing in that pattern, in the enchantment of lines, hoping perhaps that once they had etched their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of prehistoric Gondwanaland.”⁷

The Prices and Datta Chaudhuris contact that brings Tridib and May together is another connection where borders dissolve under the weight of mutual love and compassion. A romantic relationship develops between them, rising above the ‘shadow lines’ of nationality and cultural boundary. Their affair can be seen as a remarkable tool used by Ghosh to survive in a cold world of separatism and narrow segregations. Their love transcends all borderlines and shadow lines and the narrator is highly influenced by Tridib’s viewpoint of looking at the world. Tridib has always advised him to invent and not just take the world as it appears superficially. “The novel addresses the challenge of geographical fluidity and cultural dislocations with a new consciousness and firm grasp of socio-cultural and historical material, the experience of aliens and immigrants in post-colonial project of cultural assimilation, friendship across borders and adjustment with the altered face of the world.”⁸

Ghosh’s characters globe trot from one part of the world to another jumping not just political and physical boundaries but also psychological divides. The novel itself divided into two parts, ‘*Going Away*’ and ‘*Coming Home*’ overlooking the identities of nations. His characters move in so many directions and ultimately the identity of a distinct and discrete homeland becomes blurred. The world where no boundaries of race or caste is acknowledged and it becomes one big home- the real home that lies in one’s memory and consciousness away from all lines. The narrator travels in his imagination. The concept of ‘Home’ is further highlighted in the second part of the novel when the narrator’s grandmother, Thamma returns to visit her paternal home in Dhaka in 1964. But this homecoming is full of ironies and complications. She wants to bring her uncle back from East Pakistan to her home in Calcutta. But Dhaka is her birthplace, the home to which she goes back. Thamma represents the classical conception of cultures in the novel. She feels nostalgic for the old world when there were marked divisions politically as well as culturally. When she looks down from the plane to Dhaka she is surprised when she finds no physically visible divisions on the border. She asks: “... if there aren’t any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean where’s the difference then? And if there’s no difference both sides will be the same, it’ll be just like it used to be before.”⁹ The irony of the situation is that when it comes to the perpetration of violence, the cities Dhaka and Calcutta are the closest to each other. Even though concrete border lines had been drawn between them on the map, the narrator realizes the futility and illusory nature of these border lines on the maps in atlas when he comes to know about the real manner in which Tridib was killed, He takes the Tridib’s old atlas and measures the distances between nations with a compass. He realizes to his chagrin that physical distance has nothing to do with cultural space.



I was struck with wonder that there had really been a time, not so long ago, when people, sensible people of good intention had thought ... that there was a special enchantment in lines... what had they felt, I wondered, when they discovered that... there had never been a moment in the 4000 years 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.¹⁰

The non-linear narrative of the novel endorses the desire for an obliteration of borders, by desiring a union between past and present. The narrative takes the characteristics of a palimpsest with past seeping through to the present. Under Tridib's guidance, the narrator becomes a walking tour guide for streets and houses in London, knowing about them even before visiting them. The meeting of East and West is symbolically presented in the scene where Tridib meets his death, or as May considers it as he sacrifices himself to achieve a state where people stop believing in these lines and borders not just physical but also psychological. It was because of this mental barrier of hatred between people of same geographical location but different religions that May a foreigner is safe amid such brutal violence. As May reveals to the narrator, "I was safe you see I could have gone right into that mob, and they wouldn't have touched me, an English memsahib, but he must have known he was going to die... 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..."¹¹ The novel reveals very poignantly the complexity of partition borders and the looking glass metaphor wherein the border reflects not just geographical features but also the innate nature of people on either side. Kavita Dahiya throws light on this complexity:

The Shadow Lines reveals the fragility of partition borders between nations as etched out in maps, and of the frontiers policed by nation states that separate people, communities and families. However, Ghosh does this not to celebrate globalization but to argue that communities are transnational, through the work of historical memory. He suggests that the nature of boundaries can be understood through the metaphor of the looking glass: the national border between the people of India and West Pakistan resembles the mirror's boundary, in which self and reflected other are the same (joined in visual and corporal simultaneity). Therefore, in Ghosh's narrative, the borderline cannot destroy the fundamental identity of people on both sides of the boundary or render him changed into 'the other'.¹²

The Shadow Lines has widely considered as the most important post-colonial fictional work. It imbibes the contemporary post-colonial concerns like the search for identity, changing relationship with the colonizer wherein the native travels to the colonizer's land, the use of the individual's memory and the collective consciousness of the community to understand the country's past and a language coloured by vernacular usages. The novel does not celebrate the culture and ethnicity of India, but the characters travel to the west and achieve firsthand experience of the life of their colonizers. In the novel Tridib falls in love with May and Ila, again an Indian marries an Englishman, Nick Price and the developing relationship between the narrator and May towards the end of the novel is a successful attempt at bridging the cross-cultural gap. Few characters in the novel belong to both the worlds and carve out their own niche in the world. Murari Prasad observes:



“*The Shadow Lines* as a seminal piece of fiction, does bring out the rare and remarkable talent of Ghosh, who passionately searches for strategies for survival in a violent, hate filled world of narrow divisions and finds in love the enabling and productive action to tide over separatist propensities of communities and nationality groups. The novel addresses the challenge of geographical fluidity and cultural dislocations with a new consciousness and firm grasp of socio-cultural and historical materials. The experience of aliens and immigrants in post-colonial setting furnish us with the clue to the novel’s larger borders and adjustment with the altered face of the world.”¹³

Ghosh’s chief concern with the erasure of borders and boundaries is a direct questioning of the concept of nationhood. The narrator, Tridib, Ila and the grandmother are the most significant characters in the novel. Nick and May though a little distant from the main plot, are still significant for the main characters. The narrator’s parents, Ila’s parents, Mayadebi and the Shaheb, Robi and Mrs. Price are the secondary characters in the novel. The secondary characters in the novel perform faithfully the roles given to them. The women characters who transgress are denied peace and satisfaction, the grandmother dies lonely and sick, the narrator, her grandson was not even informed of her death. Ila, in love with Nick, suffers because of his infidelity. Novy Kapadia in her essay *Imagination and Politics in Amitav Ghosh’s, The Shadow Lines* says:

Amitav Ghosh’s second novel, *The Shadow Lines* (1988) has a unique narrative technique, sensitive handling of language and perceptive concepts of political issues. It is basically a memory novel, which skilfully weaves together personal lives and public events in three countries, India, England and Bangladesh. As in his first novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986) the interest and focus is on storytelling, Coil within coil of memories unfurl in the narrator’s story. However, the novel never becomes too subjective or esoteric. Amitav Ghosh with his subtle sense of humour and awareness of contemporary politics ensures that private turmoil and crises are mirrored in public turmoil and crises.¹⁴

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