



The Shadow Lines: a study in Post-colonial fiction

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The Shadow Lines is a novel that won the *Sahitya Academi Award* (1990). The structure of the novel is web-like; crisscrossing boundaries of the states of existence. The novelist juggles the past and the present, linking national histories to contemporary lives. More than lives, what matter today, are the constricting lines we enclose ourselves in, limiting the world, and human existence, to cartographic reality. The novel is enlivened by characters who belong to different races, ethnicities, ideologies, cultures, languages, religions, and most importantly, to different timelines. It spans across three generations living in Calcutta, Dhaka, and London. What binds the characters is their quest for identity and national spirit.

The unnamed boy narrator, the Datta-Chaudhury family, and the Prices family occupy the central stage, around whom the novel evolve. Tridib, an uncle of the boy-narrator emerges as an immensely interesting character, as the young narrator is impressed by his expansive knowledge; besides, he has his own ideas and responses to world events, often looked up on as eccentric by the grown-up world. It is Tridib, who teaches the boy to use imagination in a way that will free him of constricting man-made boundaries. When Tridib gets murdered by a violent Bangladeshi mob, it is the narrator, rather than his family who initiate a search for the actual cause and circumstance of his murder; this is his manifestation of respect for the man who helped him see the world in a different manner than his Bengali middle-class background ever allowed him. The narrator's Tha'mma (paternal grandmother), one of the crucial characters of the novel, a very strict disciplinarian, disapproves of Tridib, his love for tea-stall or roadside *addas*, feels Tridib has misused his life in spite of having a respectable family with important connections. Tha'mma does not like Tridib near her grandson. It is Tridib who connects London and Dhaka and Calcutta in the novel in an almost linear movement. He, a resident of Calcutta, falls in love with May Price, when on a visit to London (his family and the Prices are friends). He sacrifices his life in an attempt to save May from a mob during the communal uprisings in Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1963 – 64.

In the meantime, the narrator is in love with a distant cousin, Ila, a girl Tha'mma disapproves. In fact she gets irked when her grandson supports Ila. The narrator never expressed his love for this cousin, fearing that he would lose her. However, Ila accidentally learns about his infatuation and feels sorry for him. Tha'mma has been through a lot of difficulties in life. It is the past tragic life that prompts the old lady to attempt to re-unite the family. She travels to Dhaka, where her Jhetamoshai is still living. The old man has lost his memories, but she successfully persuades him to accompany her to Calcutta. Although the characters, who span three generations, are varied, they are boxed in a unified setting that is nowhere jarring. Events and memories flow into each other blending the present and the past. The time-line of the novel spans across 1939 up to 1964; World War II to the communal riots of Dhaka, 1964. The story begins with Tridib recounting of being taken to London as an 8 year old in 1939, and ends with his death in the communal riots, on the streets of Dhaka. The setting is



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overshadowed by violence, war, disturbances, and death. Hostility pervades the atmosphere of the novel, and is taken as something 'common and ordinary'. The novel's movement is interesting as it spins along several trajectories of reality aroused by triggering of memories.

The novel is not a unifying force, rather a distancing one. It is the memories and the imaginations, which interweave the different alternating perspectives that unify the incidents and the individuals to a story. The end effect is that of the novelist dropping in events and thus inviting the reader to imagine an individual story, very subjective. However, these detachments are not really inviting and remind the reader of the colonial perspective of the novel. The Shadow Lines is an exploration of human relationships amidst historical situations and events. The novel explores themes of nationalism, internationalism, and the impact of history in determining the cultural selfhood. Through the character of Tha'mma there is an attempt to look at the very complex and changing concepts of nationalism, an evaluation of India's freedom movement. Alongside, the novel looks at the problems that a decolonized nation faces, having lost its cultural identity through calculated and systematic suppression. The resistance movements draw new battle lines that often bring in a completely changed perspective regarding social, cultural, gender, religious, political and economic identities of the new-born nation, often resulting in hybridity that further the complexities.

Interestingly, the narrator remains un-named, thus becoming the metaphor of the colonizer attempting to remain unseen. He is the omnipresent and the omniscient presence commenting on every character and every event. It is through his descriptions that we get insights into memories. This obscurity accounts for the precision of the details down to the brand names of the chocolates and cars. Also important is the fact that the narrator remains like an indefinite shadow spread out across the novel; we never get the scope to imagine what he looks like. This undefined presence makes him a symbol of the colonized, inferior and unimportant; subordinate to the colonizer and thus unseen, unnoticed.

The narrator shares with Tridib, his mentor, the desire to travel; and also share the uncanny ability to travel mentally to places they have never physically been to. The physical proximity is manifest in the details of the narrator's remembrance of Tridib, even after his death in the communal riots. It is the imagination that establish an unbreakable emotional link between the two. Tha'mma is afraid of this proximity and the deep bond, reminding the reader of the colonizer-colonized bond, which makes her warn her grandson about Tridib. However, fettered by various social restrictions, Tridib becomes the narrator's only escape to freedom. Tridib is able to connect his memories to the present. The narrator becomes a symbol of the colonized nation holding on to memories that can lend its present a sense of glory and grandeur, give it a push towards freedom and release. In this novel memory roots characters to time and identity. We are never able to alter history; so, memories of a glorious past become the strength of our present. Memory has the ability to transcend all boundaries of



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time and space, thus seamlessly moving from the past to the present and the reverse. Thus what one forgets too becomes as important as what one remembers.

The narrator, inspired by Tridib, conjures up mental images of places he has never visited or situations he has never experienced. It is this 'power of fancy' that enables him to recognise places in London that he had read about as a child, when he really visits the place as a young adult. Similarly he constructs stories from "faint recollections" and "faded photographs", in an attempt to create a story that becomes his story. There can be several constructions of reality, with each individual carving out his own piece of history. This is a very important trajectory that Ghosh's *Shadow Lines* dwell up on. That in turn becomes the metaphor of the movement of independence from the clutches of the colonizer.

The problem of identity can be noticed from the very beginning of *The Shadow Lines*. It is not merely about personal identities, but also spatial identities and communal identities. Identities are not created out of realities and symbols alone, but also through imagination. However, most groups of people strive to hold on to pre-conceived notions of race, culture, and ethnicity. It is in this collective consciousness that power structures are built. This is 'essentialism' that refuses to recognise individual perceptions that might differ widely. The majority of the characters of this novel tends to hold on to their status quo, resisting even the slightest changes, barring Tridib and the narrator. So Tridib becomes the voice of the author when he claims that everyone chooses his own story to live in as life is a story.

Along with 'essentialism' that defines what a particular ethnic, or cultural group chooses as its identity, there is also 'othering' drawing of parameters by which one group excludes another. Both these notions define the postcolonial psyche. This otherness is often fixed through stereotyping the "other". Tridib, in Ghosh's novel becomes this "other". He has looked at the world in a way that is very much his own; a world that though mosaic, is borderless. It is this idealistic vision that influences the narrator and makes him, too, a unique character. Thus the narrative moves on to explore the mirror image existence of Dhaka and Calcutta; two cities so alike one another that if you see one it is as good as seeing the other. Ila also stands out because she is so unlike Tridib or the narrator. She is the most widely travelled character in the novel, but is unable to ever imagine a place. The physical presence of a place is the only thing of significance to her. The narrator thus raises the question as to whether she has ever travelled, in spite of having been to a number of different places. Thus the novelist moves into the realm of boundaries that define our existence. The boundaries, often shadow lines, can become sources of bloody violence and wars, like the one that killed Tridib. On the personal level people often strive to overcome these artificial political borders braking lives and breaking families. The image of the upturned part of the divided house in Tha'mma's memory become the metaphor of the historical partition of a nation at the juncture of freedom resulting in never ending violence and bloodshed.



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The other prominent post-colonial notion explored in the novel, is that of ‘worlding’; a process that ensures accommodation in a Eurocentric society, now termed ‘global’. Apart from voluntary migration in search of better living, it also endorses forced westernisation of societies and cultures through colonisation. The novel successfully includes the question of diaspora as ‘worlding’; travel or migration pervading the whole narrative. The multiple references to real historical events and geographical locations weld the imagination to reality. The novel is divided into two sections; the first, “Going away”, in 1939, of Mayadevi, with her son Tridib, to England, and “Coming home” of the narrator, to his motherland, India, the second part of the book. Thus the treatment of diaspora, both physical and imaginative make the novel a postcolonial success. Tha’mma’s pain erupts from her failure to accept the necessities of bureaucratic complications she suffers when she wants to travel ‘home’ to her ‘*jethamoshai*’. Her confusion becomes the confusion of the colonized who are forced to accept historical changes their affect their immediate lives. As victims of a subjugating machinery they are often made to forget the realities of their localities and identities.

Another key element of any post-colonial work is the concept of hybridity; a homogenising of identity and culture, in the setting of the novel. The narrator himself is a product of hybridity as he is an Indian (by birth) who received an English education. The story in its turn oscillates between India and England. It was colonization that imposed upon the Indians the English education and normalised the use of the English language. Tha’mma’s ideas of nationalism and patriotism resist against such hybridisation; she believes in a homogeneous society with clearly defined social boundaries. Military borders can only attempt to define people superficially, the reality is the interdependence of cultures and communities distinctly different. Tha’mma’s journey to Dhaka is both a coming and going, the barbed wire a confusion that she fails to comprehend although she signs the forms for visa. She does not understand where she really belongs to, here in Calcutta, or to the half upturned house in Dhaka, that she grew up in. Both Tha’mma and Ila fail to belong. Ila cannot be at home in Calcutta although her ancestral home is here. She eventually flees to London, marries an English boy, gets a job and tries to settle down. But she fails. Her London freedom is dear as it makes her rootless. She fails to recognise the history of India, her home. Ghosh’s novel mentions dates and locations that are historically true. Even then the lack of concreteness of time and pace makes it a story that can happen anywhere, at any time. It is a setting where the lines, whether social, or political, remain unseen and incomprehensible. Unlike other postcolonial novels, Ghosh’s novel does not treat diaspora as a complete loss. It is also the womb of creativity in new cosmopolitan cultures that are born. This is a text where the past, present, and future freely intermingle to create a new concept of time that although hybrid is highly creative, where history helps one understand contemporary realities, thus providing a vision where memory of a different time and space mingle to create a new identity out of the fractured time, in its turn erasing lines of division.



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The pain and desolation of post-colonial existence, the isolation and rootlessness resulting from cultures and communities being ripped apart, from memories that become indelible, from the realisation of the new present though simultaneous movements in timelines, portrayed in the novel firmly place the novel in the genre of the post-colonial. Ultimately, it is a novel that reinforces the feelings of not being able to belong and leave a bitter taste of colonialism lurking around the corner.

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