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## Memories that Loom Out an Enthralling Narrative: *The Shadow Lines*

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**Abstract** *The Shadow Lines*, a novel by Amitav Ghosh, intricately weaves together the tapestry of memories, both personal and collective, to construct a captivating narrative. Set against the backdrop of historical events such as the Partition of India and the communal riots of Dhaka, the novel explores the fluidity of borders and identities. Through the eyes of an unnamed narrator, Ghosh delves into the interconnected lives of families in Calcutta and Dhaka, blurring the lines between past and present, reality and imagination.

**Keywords** *The Shadow Lines*, Memories, Loom Out

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### 1. Introduction

*The Shadow Lines* is structured on a pattern of contrast between imagination and reality, present and past, childhood presences and adult responses to them. The novel consists of a series of episodes moving both backwards and forwards in time not linked chronologically to its predecessor, but at the same time explaining what has gone before and what will happen next. Again and again it is demonstrated that distance like time is both subjective and objective, sometimes people inhabiting the same house may remain poles apart from each other as in Th'amma's parental house which symbolizes the situation of India and Pakistan whereas sometimes places geographically far off from each other may be united by some incident as in the events of 1964:

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...so closely that 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 (SL 233).

Along with the names of unknown places brought into the childhood of the narrator through the employment of his family members into foreign services (Tridib's father and May's father are diplomats working in foreign countries) as well as twice removed stories of Englishman Snipe (who is said to have travelled Malaysia, Fiji, Bolivia, Ceylon and many other places) and the encyclopedic knowledge of Tridib that offers the narrator a wide-wide space to expand the wings of his imagination. The spatial movement is also from a flat in Gole Park, which is the first mentioned house of the author, to a house on the Gariahat road. In both the settings the conversation loving stretch of people of Gariahat road occupy a central space with the locale of Calcutta described precisely. The shifting local and the sequence of public life are juxtaposed with the relentless educational compulsion of the middle class. The narrative of *The Shadow Lines* oscillates back and forth in time, exuding space through the journey through time.

Space is also generated in the portrayal of polar characters. On the one hand is Th'amma, the unnamed author's grandmother, for whom time "was like a toothbrush: it went mouldy if it wasn't used ... It begins to stink" (SL 41). On the other hand, we have Tridib who can also be regarded as the alter ego of the narrator and who "never seemed to use this time, but his time didn't stink" (SL 4). There are numerous other characters characterizing



each other by their polarity in the narrative. There is Ila who is travelling through the world with her parents. Places for her occur only in airports and their ladies toilet as well as schoolbooks. On the other hand is the unnamed narrator who lives only in memories. He is shown the world through the Bartholomew Atlas by Tridib and through his stories. The narrator feels, "Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with" (SL 20). The narrator in his imagination lives in the world exhibited in the atlas so much that the places mapped up in the atlas actually unfold in the young boy's imagination. So familiar is he with the world laid open to him in Bartholomew Atlas that when he gets an opportunity to visit these places in reality, his familiarity with London of the 'yester' years shocks the people around him. It is interpreted by others as some sort of mysticism by some but the author in fact knows the magic of being present in more than one place at the same time. The fascination of the narrator for the maps is not dimmed with the passing years. The "A to Z" street Atlas of London is on his tips. He lives in the present with the others but in fact he also is a co-sharer of the world of the others: their past and their memories. So this book in particular abounds in imagination.

Ghosh's preoccupation with shadow lines or demarcations as "arbitrary and invented decisions between people and nations" has been questioned by A.N. Kaul. According to Kaul "*The Shadow Lines* ends up attributing value and a higher reality to a sort of amorphous romantic subjectively." 2 Through the impact of these political events on private life of people, Ghosh successfully creates a nexus between historical moment and the world of fiction.

The particular accuracy with which the details are presented gives the initial impression that the mode of presentation is realism. Space is also evolved by the intricate connection between the names of places the narrators describes. The places particularly are specified with their exact address-the Prices lived in 44 Lymington Road in West. Brand names of objects are meticulously mentioned; Rennie's digestive tablets, cars, Nick's shirts of Twin ball and Axel jackets from Armani. Amidst the plethora of details one space is deliberately left blank. The narrator, through whose eyes we see all the action taking place, is not described in name or person. This vacuum dexterously created, like a pump, sucks in the details of different persons, events and places, illuminating the lives of others and irradiating them in a manner that the colours of different hues of people's life come together to form a meaningful pattern.

Not only the lives of the people but also such details as the outlines of a house, give fluidity to the narrative. The sloping roof of the houses in Colombo means for the narrator a new way of life. It means as Tridib points out to him, absence of any personal space. It is also a channel to get through to other people. Similarly verandas are an integral part of a house which provides access to the outside world. Thus the narrator refuses to accept the ground plan drawn by Ila as real because it does not have a veranda through which, the narrator believes, a person knows what's going on in the surrounding. The roofs and the verandas for the author are enclosed spaces connected to the interior and not merely the exterior of a house. Houses have a relationship with countries in this novel, which reconfirms the parallel between the family and the nation.

Space is also captured in the two love stories recorded in the novel and the antithesis of both the relations. First is the love story of Tridib and May and the second is the love triangle of the narrator's love for his cousin, Ila and her love for Nick Price. It is noteworthy that in *The Shadow Lines* the romantic imagination originates and has its consummation only between two people who are on opposite sides of the borders. This is explicit in the question posed when Tridib narrates his make believe trip to London where he meets the Price family and May on one of his excursion to the Gole Park adda. The moment he mentions May, a foreigner, the listeners at once imagine her to be sexy. May, on the other hand, is quite ordinary to look at with no glamour and gloss of the "Mem Saab" on her.

Tridib's love for May is an attempt to transcend the boundaries of time and space. This is the reason why he wants to meet her as the loneliest of strangers in a place without a past or history so that they are really free even of their own identity. This desire is rooted in his childhood memory of being a witness to the coupling of two strangers in wartime London in a ruin. It is ironic that Tridib had wanted to meet May in a place without history,



yet the ruin that they choose for themselves is Victoria Memorial, a place which preserved history in the form of historical heritage

The narrator is intrigued by Ila's Western ways. His desire for her has its origin in her foreignness. Similarly Ila's love for Nick can be taken to be dictated by her life abroad, particularly by her racial experience in England. The pain of racial discrimination suffered by Ila is reflected in the game of house that she plays with the narrator. The house that they inhabit in this game is in London and the imagined daughter Magda has golden hair and blue eyes. At the base of all these love stories can be seen the desire to go beyond boundaries as is evident in the one untold story:

the best story in Europe, told when Europe was a better place, a place without borders and countries it was a German story in what we call Germany, Nordic in north, French in France, Welsh in Wales, Cornish in Cornwall; it was the story of a hero called Tristan, a very sad story about a man without a country who fell in love with a woman across the seas (*SL* 81).

Stories are central to the core of the narrative in *The Shadow Lines*. It is Tridib's stories which introduce the narrator to the global nebula of places. It is the stories Th'amma hears about the terrorist activities that inspire her in her youth to kill. It is the stories invented by Ila that indicate the trauma she suffered in England and again it is the stories narrated to the narrator by Robi and May that fill in blanks of the memory of the very important person in the narrator's life and introduce him to a final 'redemptive mystery' that a price has to be paid to take your stand in life. A final redemptive mystery as described by John Mee "is one where difference continually structures the world but imagination struggles to negotiate forms of translation with a precision that resists collapsing difference into any kind of master code."<sup>7</sup>

Success is not the yardstick of assessing the correctness of any ideology. It is better to die fighting for a cause than to live a long life as a coward. The memory of all the people who were mute spectators of Tridib's death haunts them throughout their life. So Tridib still lives after his death through the memory of other people. Tridib yearns for a united world, a world free from the ravages of collective memory of hatred, a space without history. This desire seems to be consummated in his death. Born in India, travelled extensively during his childhood, Tridib died performing an essential humanitarian duty of trying to save two lives solely out of humanitarian concern. He once tells the narrator, "One would 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 limits the limits of one's mind to other times and places and even, if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror" (*SL* 186)

In his death ultimately Tridib attains this universality. The revelation of the mystery of his death is redemptive for the author and grants him a spiritual insight. The novel concludes with a spiritual bond between the narrator and May with both lying in each other arms wrapped in the memories of Tridib. Quite contrary to an act of physical gratification this is a spiritual coming together of two people through the memory of a common beloved. The narrator is the alter ego of Tridib and May his beloved who has lived a life of a 'Yogi' ever after his death. Like Tridib who sacrificed his life for the cause of humanity, she devotes her life to the same cause though always living within the boundaries of social norms. May can be taken as the opposite of Th'amma and Ila because against the loud expostulations of the later two she meekly burns in the memory of her beloved Tridib, canalising and utilising her energies towards constructive action.

In such contrasts and identification *The Shadow Lines* encloses space. It is a novel with many layers of meaning, each with a vast depth to fathom. Time and space in the *The Shadow Lines* enable the actual and imagined to coexist harmoniously adding up dimensions to individual's desire through various patterns of memory. Message is driven home to the reader directly through short and pithy sentences and a directness of tone, reflecting the success with which Ghosh is able to manipulate memory through the narrative of *The Shadow Lines*.



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