

**Divided Nations But Undivided Memories:**  
**A Critical Study w.r.t Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines***

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## **Abstract**

In this paper I propose to study the effect of partition and the consequent communal riots on the sentiments of the people. My main focus is on showing that the lines which were drawn to divide India into two parts could not really divide the memories and feelings of the displaced people. I will discuss this with reference to Amitav Ghosh's novel '*The Shadow Lines*.' The lines that are drawn by the leadership of a nation to divide a country without considering the sentiments and bonding of the people of that country are unable to divide the memories and emotions of the people. Such lines are just shadow lines that do cast influence on the minds of the displaced people but fail to divide their memories.

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British Indian Empire was partitioned on the basis of religious demographics in the year 1947. It resulted in the dissolution of the Indian Empire and end of the British rule. But the partition in itself was a very violent one. Millions of people were displaced during the partition and several hundred lost their lives. The violent nature of the partition created an atmosphere of hostility and suspicion between India and Pakistan that plagues their relationship even today. The partition and the post- partition scenario became themes of a number of books written on India. The books written on the theme of partition and the books which depict the post-partition scenario, present to the readers the heart-rending stories of the people who lost their lives and those who lost their loved ones and their homes.

*The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh is a realistic novel with innovations and complexities. It is one of such novels that are written on the themes of partition. The novel depicts the post-partition scenario of India and the violence that followed it. It is all set against the background of the Second World War and the communal riots of 1964 in some parts of India and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The aftermaths of 1939 war fictionalizes the man-made divisions. It clearly presents to the readers that the partition that resulted in the division of a nation into two parts could not actually divide the memories of the people who were forced to migrate to the either side.

*The Shadow Lines* weaves fact and fiction in a very gripping narrative of the lives of the people living in the post-partition time. The narrative mirrors lives across nations and spans almost half a century of recent Indian history. The story is a fine blend of cultural differences and social norms. Tabish Khair in his book *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Companion* presents the idea of the novel says that the novel *Shadow Lines* romanticizes the imaginations as a whole. (183)

The novel is constructed on the memories and experiences of a young boy growing in Calcutta and later on in Delhi and London. The narrator acts as an observer of the whole situation. His character takes shape gradually from his interaction with other characters of the novel.

The novel narrates the story of three generations spread over Calcutta, London and Dhaka. Characters from different religions, culture and nationalities have been woven together in a tangible world. The narrator's family is settled in Calcutta where his grandmother is a head mistress of a school. Family of Mayadebi, on the other hand, is a globe trotter with Tridib being an exception. He lives in his ancestral house and frequently visits Gol Park with his acquaintances. These two families are friends with an English family the Tresawsens. The friendship began when Lionel Tresawson was in India and developed interest in spiritualism. He started attending meetings of the Theosophical Society in Calcutta. He met Mr. Justice Chandrasekhar Dutta Chowdhary, Tridib's grandfather, at such a séance conducted by a Russian Lady. They developed friendship thereafter. And this friendship was strengthened by their successors. So, their memories connect even though their nationalities differ. The lines drawn between different countries have the least impact on the emotions and feelings of the people. The question that Amitav Ghosh puts forth is whether cultures can be contained within the boundaries made by a few politicians

The title '*The Shadow Lines*' is very significant as it shows the shadow lines between nations that can be surpassed only through emotional bonding. And this transcendence is clearly shown through the characters of Dutta-Chowdhary and Tresawsens and later Prices also. The past, the present and the future gel so inextricably that all the lines of demarcation are completely wiped out. The nameless narrator of the novel is highly in awe of his uncle Tridib and is trying to come to terms with the past and the present. He is very keen to find out about the death of Tridib who has been his mentor whole life. Tridib is the person who gave him "worlds to travel in" and "eyes to see them with". It is Tridib who has taught him how to use his imagination with precision.

*The Shadow Lines* has been constructed on the memories and experiences of various characters, most important being the narrator. The memories of the narrator are related to Tridib, his family and acquaintances. The memories that have nothing to do with the boundaries demarcated in the maps. These memories are spread across time and place. Memory and imagination work in accord in *The Shadow Lines*. The narrator's concrete imagination dwells heavily upon Tridib's memories and experiences. The narrator goes to London for his doctorate work but he feels that he is not new to the place. It is a place which is already known to him. He has seen London through the eyes of his mentor and inspiration Tridib. Tridib's vivid account of London and the narrator's extraordinary imagination makes him feel that he has already visited the place before. The narrator stays in London for about a year but his life is most affected by Dhaka that he never personally visits in his life. The narrator has seen Dhaka through the eyes of his grandmother only. And it is the tragedy that takes place in Dhaka which changes his life

forever. He loses his mentor Tridib on the roads of Dhaka when he is killed by a rioting mob along with *Tha'mma's* uncle.

The nations were divided on the pretext of religions and millions of people migrated from one part to the other. During this migration thousands of people lost their lives and millions were rendered homeless. But the memories of the people could not be divided. People who migrated to the either side always had the memories of their place of birth. They always had in their minds the picture of their nation where they were born and brought up; the nation where they grew up playing in the mud and running in the streets with friends. The line that was drawn by the politicians to divide one nation into two could never divide the sentiments and memories of the people. Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* very interestingly presents this fact to the readers through different characters, *Tha'mma* being the most obvious one.

*Tha'mma* epitomizes nationalist movements of India and has been an inspiration for the narrator. He uses his grandmother's eyes to see her life in Dhaka as a young girl, her uncle and cousins, the other side of the big house where everything was upside down. *Tha'mma* represents India's national identity in the Nationalist Movement. She is a migrant from Dhaka but her ardent love of India cannot be questioned. She goes back to Dhaka after about 20 years to bring her nonagenarian uncle to Calcutta since there is a revolution going on in Dhaka. In Dhaka she realizes how alien she has become to the place where she was born. She feels as if she is a foreigner. Tridib at this point makes it more vivid when he says, "But you are a foreigner now, you're as foreigner here as May – much more than May, for look at her, she doesn't need a visa to come here" (SL 195). The remark of Tridib shocks the readers.

*Tha'mma's* visit to Dhaka gives us a peep into her psyche and raises a lot of questions about the lines drawn between nations. While filling in a form in Dhaka, *Tha'mma* swiftly fills in her nationality as 'Indian' without any hesitation but she starts pondering while filling in her birth place as Dhaka (Bangladesh). There are a series of questions that arise in her mind. Does birth in a country give you the right to nationality? How does your nationality change if the nation is demarcated? Do the lines that divide nations also divide memories? And like wise. The author does give a very plausible answer to these questions through the character of Jethamoshai, *Tha'mma's* uncle. He says, "I don't believe in this India-Shindia. ...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" (SL 213). And eventually he becomes the victim of the communal rioting in Dhaka. Narrator's mentor and inspiration Tridib also dies in the incident. The death of Ukil Babu, *Tha'mma's* uncle clearly throws forward another question i.e. Are people safe even in their country? Ukil Babu boasts about his country and says he will die where he was born but did he ever expect to die like this?

*Tha'mma*, though born in Dhaka in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan), is a true Indian at heart. She used to dream when she was in college to be a part of the militant groups which were fighting for India's freedom. She was fascinated by the acts of dare-devilry performed by the freedom fighters against the British imperialists. She didn't know much about the freedom struggle but she was so ardent a lover of nationalism that she was ready to even wash utensils, cook food and wash clothes if she could become a part of the freedom movement. One of her classmates was arrested by the police one day as he was a member of such a group and was assigned the task to kill an English magistrate. At that time, *Tha'mma* felt remorse because she had missed an opportunity to take part in the freedom movement.

Amitav Ghosh presents different opinions of different people on nations and the notion of nationalism. *Tha'mma* clearly has a very high notion of nationalism. On the other hand, Ila, narrator's cousin, has an entirely different view of nationalism. She is more concerned with her personal freedom as opposed to *Tha'mma's* nationalist freedom. Ila's view point seems to be modern and post-independence. She presents an antithesis to *Tha'mma*. This is why she is so abhorred by her lover's grandmother. The narrator is secretly in love with the modern and open minded Ila but this love is never reciprocated. Through the character of Ila, Amitav Ghosh presents to the readers the fact that third world countries are denied the historical value. Ila is more concerned about western nationalism than the Indian nationalism. Ila says to her cousin, "nothing really important ever happens where you are" representing total western disregard of the calamities faced by third world countries. For her anti-fascist wars are more important than the famines and rioting that India suffers from. It's more significant for her what is happening in the western world. She has almost no regard for the sufferings of the people of India or other third world countries. This view point of hers makes her completely unlikable to *Tha'mma*.

Amitav Ghosh expertises in the representation of the characters. *Tha'mma's* character is very much close to the Indian society. She hates Ila to such an extent that she puts her grandson's career in jeopardy to humiliate Ila when she writes a letter to the principal of the narrator's school saying that the narrator visits prostitutes. But we can't say that perception is completely wrong though it definitely is opposed to the Indian nationalism. Ila acquires such an opinion because of the treatment she gets as a woman in India. There are a lot of restrictions put on her while she is in India. She is once forced out of a cabaret bar in the Grand Hotel in Calcutta by her uncle Robi. This clearly shows how restricted and constrained the lives of women are in India. And these restrictions and constraints force Ila to form biased opinion towards the third world countries like India.

The lines drawn between different nations do not really affect the opinions and feelings of the people living there. *Tha'mma* was born in Dhaka but her heart is completely Indian. On the contrary, Ila was born in India but the problems in India are not her concern. She is more

towards the western nationalism. Again we see that lines that divide nations cannot really divide the minds of the people and their memories.

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