

Shadows of the Self Memory, Imagination, and the Construction of Identity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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I. INTRODUCTION

There is a moment early in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* when the unnamed narrator admits that he cannot be certain whether a particular memory belongs to him or whether he has simply heard about it so many times that it has become his own. This admission, quietly placed and easy to overlook, is in fact the moral and philosophical centre of the entire novel. It tells us that memory, as Ghosh understands it, is not a private archive stored neatly inside one person's mind. It is something shared, borrowed, passed; a story around a fire; and like any story, it changes with each telling. In this paper I suggest that, in *The Shadow Lines*, memory does not serve as a representation of the past, rather a claim to the past, a collective memory, a memory that has a political power, and a very human memory, a memory that seeks to make sense of that broken world.

In 1988, *The Shadow Lines* was published and it was an instant hit as one of the most significant postcolonial works of South Asian literature. It is the tale of an inner life utterly moulded by the presence of others, of places he has never actually met, a Bengali voice in Calcutta who grew up without ever having known a Bengali person he did meet. He has experienced the war through his cousin Tridib. He grew up with memories of Dhaka, which became part of East Pakistan after Partition of 1947. He has pieced together a sense of the Price family, a British family involved with his family since the 1930s, through bits of stories, photos and heard conversations. Everything he knows, he knows at second hand. And yet his knowledge feels deeply real — perhaps more real than direct experience could ever be.

This paper is organized into four sections. The first establishes the theoretical framework for understanding memory in the novel, drawing on the work of Maurice Halbwachs, Paul Ricoeur, and Walter Benjamin. The second examines the narrator's relationship to inherited memory and explores what Ghosh suggests about the value of imaginative knowledge. The third turns to the grandmother as a study in how memory can harden into ideology and what the human cost of that process is. The fourth considers the formal strategies of the novel itself, arguing that its non-linear structure is not merely a stylistic choice but a philosophical statement about the nature of time, memory, and narrative. Together, these sections build toward the conclusion that *The Shadow Lines* offers one of the most nuanced and humanly compelling treatments of memory in contemporary literature.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the novel's publication in 1988, the study of *The Shadow Lines* has increased significantly and the critical debate surrounding the novel mirrors the changing nature of postcolonial literary studies in the last three decades. The main issues of criticism in the novel were those concerning nationalism and Partition. Recent scholarship has increasingly been focused on the themes of memory, narrative and diasporic identity. This paper joins this ongoing dialogue and proposes a more unified approach to reading that brings together issues of memory and issues of borders and issues of identity in a way that they are not separable.

One of Ghosh's earliest and most influential critics is Elleke Boehmer, who locates *The Shadow Lines* in a tradition of postcolonial writing that questions "national identity" rather than extols it. Boehmer points to Ghosh as part of a group of South Asian novelists who took over the political and emotional debris of Partition and are exploring its contradictory nature in the novel. Her reading focuses on the formal sophistication of the novel, with a particular interest in its non-linear structure, which was a deliberate attempt to counterpose the linear and progressive narratives of the nationalist historiography. In this paper, I return to Boehmer's insight by making the formal strategies of the novel legible for its philosophy of memory.

Another important reference is Sara Suleri's important study of the postcolonial narrative. In the fragmented, self-questioning narrative forms of postcolonial literature, Suleri says, is a specific type of historical anxiety, a profound doubt in the trustworthiness of memory and historical accounts. Her reading of South Asian fiction as perpetually haunted by the trauma of colonial history is directly applicable to *The Shadow Lines*, where the events of Partition and the 1964 riots are never presented as settled historical facts but always as contested, emotionally charged memories. In this paper, I will interact with Suleri's framework, but also argue that Ghosh's account of memory is not just about historical anxiety, but is also positive, in that it is a form of legitimate and valuable understanding that is imaginative.

Rosemary George's exploration of politics of home in the postcolonial novel is especially pertinent to the novel's consideration of displacement and belonging. The idea of home is never straightforward or consistent in postcolonial writings; it is always challenged, always determined with respect to displacement, always charged by colonialism and nationalism. Her reading of *The Shadow Lines* is about the relationship between the characters in the novel and the city in which they live, and the cities to which they belong, as Ghosh describes them as being not a place, but a relationship. This paper relies on the insight George provided in his analysis of the grandmother's relations with Dhaka and the narrator's imaginary London.

The most immediately pertinent recent research is from Golam Rabbi whose reading of memory and narrative in *The Shadow Lines* offers a thorough description of how memory is manifested within the

structure of the novel and how the novel's philosophy of memory is enacted. Rabbi claims that the non-linear structure of the novel is not just a stylistic device, but a formal argument: that it is a way of asserting that the experiences of the 1930s, 1940s and 1960s should not be arranged in any particular order, since their memories are lived and lived in an associative fashion. This paper agrees with Rabbi's formal argument and extends it by connecting it more explicitly to the theoretical frameworks of Ricoeur and Hutcheon.

Within the broader field of memory studies, the work of Halbwachs, Ricoeur, Benjamin, and Nora has been extensively applied to postcolonial literature, though not always in direct engagement with Ghosh. The work of Andreas Huyssen, whose book *The Stages of Memory and Modernity* has explored the dominance of memory as a cultural issue in the late twentieth century, which appears to coincide with the unsettled, even uncertain, sense of the past, offers some broader context. Huyssen's description of a 'culture of memory' an anxious, all-pervading awareness of the past and a concern with preserving and interpreting it has a certain resonance with Ghosh's novel, which might be said to be both a product of and a reflection of this state.

There have been a number of studies on how Hutcheon's idea of historiographic metafiction is applied to *The Shadow Lines*, including the comparison of Ghosh's novel to other post-colonial novels like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Such comparisons are illuminating but sometimes they can be used to make *The Shadow Lines* part of a larger family in ways that can diminish focus on its particular formal and philosophical accomplishment. This paper focuses exclusively on *The Shadow Lines* in order to give its particular treatment of memory the sustained and detailed attention it deserves.

What is missing from the current scholarship, however, is an effort to consider the novel's discussions of memory, nationalism and identity as a single argument rather than three themes that are simply presented as residing in the same text. It is precisely in these three ways that nationalisms and borders are inseparable from memory in the novel, and identity is inseparable from them, that the novel has power, this paper argues. The following sections develop this integrated reading through close analysis

of the novel's key passages, characters, and formal strategies.

III. MEMORY AS A COLLECTIVE AND NARRATIVE ACT

Any serious engagement with memory in *The Shadow Lines* must begin with the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, whose foundational work established that memory is never truly individual. In *Les cadres sociaux de la memoire*, published in 1925, Halbwachs argued that we remember always within social frameworks the families, communities, languages, and institutions that give our experiences their shape and meaning. "It is in society," he wrote, "that people normally acquire their memories" (38). This does not mean that personal memory is an illusion. It means that even our most intimate recollections are structured by the communities we belong to, the stories we have been told, and the collective frameworks of meaning that we have inherited rather than invented.

Ghosh's story's narrator is a living example of Halbwachs's principle. He didn't attend most of the scenes he's describing. He was given this wartime London, the London he knows so vividly, the bombings of the Blitz, the Price family house on Lymington Road, the texture of English life in the 1940s, by Tridib, his older cousin who had lived in London briefly as a child. He inherited the city of mango trees and monsoon rains from his grandmother, Dhaka. The communal riots in which Tridib is killed at the end of the novel are just as nebulous as the rest of the novel, appearing in the narrator's recollection in bits and pieces years later. His memories are, in Halbwachs's terms, entirely social: constructed within and through the stories of others.

Paul Ricoeur extends this insight in ways that are particularly useful for literary analysis. Ricoeur believes that memory and narrative are just one. It is not just remembering in the past, but telling the story in the past and telling the story in the past is remaking the story. Memory is always, in Ricoeur's words, a "re-presentation" — a present presentation of the past, and a re-presentation that is limited by the condition, wishes, and feelings of the person who is remembering (21). This implies that memory is not a mere recording, but is a creative process. Each memory is an interpretation, a selection, and a reconstruction.

This picture is enriched by Walter Benjamin's thoughts on storytelling. In the essay 'The Storyteller', Benjamin's position is that the essence of storytelling is not the delivery of information, but the delivery of experience — the transfer of one person's 'way of the world' into another person's consciousness. A story teller is not one "who simply recounts events" but one who "makes experience into wisdom and passes that wisdom on," Benjamin writes (87). *The Shadow Lines'* Tridib is just such a storyteller. He doesn't just describe to the reader what London is like. He offers him London as an experience, felt reality, as a means of living in a world he has never actually been in.

IV. THE NARRATOR AND THE ETHICS OF INHERITED MEMORY

The narrator of *The Shadow Lines* is, from the very beginning, a figure defined by his relationship to other people's memories. He grows up in Calcutta in the shadow of stories — stories about London, stories about Dhaka, stories about the Price family, stories about a version of the world that is always just beyond his direct reach. What is remarkable about Ghosh's portrayal is that this condition of secondhand knowledge is not presented as a deficit or a limitation. It is presented as a distinctive and deeply valuable form of understanding.

The key to this argument lies in the concept of longing. Tridib tells the narrator, in a passage that the narrator never forgets, that "one never learns anything but through longing — a longing which was a form of imagination" (Ghosh 29). This is a radical claim about the nature of knowledge. It rejects the notion that knowledge has to come from first-hand, empirical observation in order to be real. Rather, it says that the deepest kinds of knowing is through desire — the craving to know something thoroughly, to participate in it imaginatively, to love it into life in your own mind.

The narrator is just like this in dealing with London. Prior to his visit, he has "a whole city in my mind" (Ghosh 26). The city he creates in London from Tridib's tales is not a watered-down version of the real city. It's a reality that's subjective, emotional, made of bits of story and desire. But the narrator eventually visits London, where he discovers that the London he encounters is different from the one he imagined, and it is not a disappointment, it is a surprise. It reminds

him that what we have within us, the cities, the people, the histories are all constructs, and that construction is an inherent part of us.

The notion of lieux de memoire, sites of memory, developed by Pierre Nora, can help explain what is happening here. In his seminal essay “Between Memory and History,” Nora contends that in contemporary societies, traditional memory, that which is inscribed in everyday life, communal practice, and oral history, has become more and more supplanted by institutional memory. In response to this displacement, people relate their memory to certain places, objects and rituals, acquire personal and collective meaning. These are “milieux de memoire,” environments where memory exists and thrives, which have been artificially maintained because the natural spaces that nourished them no longer exist, says Nora (7).

Dhaka is just such a place for the narrator of *The Shadow Lines*. He has never visited Dhaka but the city is one of the most memorable and emotional places in his heart. He knows it from Tridib’s tales, from his grandmother’s recollections, from the photo albums and chatter he’s hearing since his youth. For him Dhaka is not a place on a map. It is a place of memory, a place that never existed except in his imagination, which is full of longing, loss and burden of a history he never lived.

What Ghosh suggests through the narrator’s relationship to inherited memory is something genuinely important about the human condition. We all, to a greater or lesser extent, living within memories we did not make ourselves. We carry the stories of our parents and grandparents, the histories of our communities, the accumulated weight of events we never witnessed but that have shaped the world we inhabit. *The Shadow Lines* asks us to take this condition seriously — not as a problem to be solved but as a fundamental feature of what it means to be human, to belong to a particular place and time, to be connected to others across the distances of geography and history.

V. THE GRANDMOTHER AND THE VIOLENCE OF HARDENED MEMORY

Contrary to the narrator’s relaxed, open, expansive relationship with the inherited memory, Ghosh places the granddaughter’s very different way of

remembering. The grandmother was born in Dhaka then part of East Pakistan after 47 Partition. She has never been able to get over being uprooted from her childhood home. That loss has hardened in the years that have passed, and turned into a ruthless and inflexible Indian nationalism; a sense of borders as necessary and natural; an insistence that the violence they generate is a worthwhile cost for the sense of identity they create.

This is the most telling scene in the grandmother’s characterization: “If there are no borders, how will anyone know who they are?” (Ghosh 233). This question reveals the logic at the heart of her worldview. For the grandmother, identity requires boundaries. In order to understand who you are, you have to understand who you are not. And in order to do that, you have to draw a line in the sand, you have to create an actual physical division between us and them. Her nationalism is not motivated by cynicism or opportunism. It is the response of a genuine wound, of a genuine loss, of a displacement that has never found closure.

But what Ghosh does with the grandmother is much more complicated than mere critique or empathy. In her portrayal of the grandmother, Ghosh makes clear that the kind of memory the grandmother embodies — the kind of memory that turns itself into dogma, into ideology, into belief in the absolute necessity of the border — is precisely the same kind of memory that has led to the violence inflicted upon her. The violence of the communal riots that claim the life of Tridib comes directly out of the same thought processes that the grandmother exemplifies.

Nora’s framework is helpful here too. For the grandmother, Dhaka is a site of memory in the most painful sense — a place that was once a living environment of memory, her childhood home, her community, her sense of self — and that has been severed from her by history and politics. The border has cut her off from the living reality of the place, leaving her with only the preserved, emotionally charged memory of it. And over time, that preserved memory has become the core of her political identity, the wound around which her nationalism has formed. What is most disturbing and most human about the grandmother is that she is not wrong about what she has lost. She has lost something real. Her grief is real. Her anger is real. The problem is not the grief itself but what the grief has become — the way it has been

transformed from a personal wound into a political weapon, from a particular loss into a general principle. This transformation, Ghosh suggests, is one of the most dangerous things that memory can do. When personal pain becomes political ideology, when individual grief is generalized into a justification for violence, memory stops being a way of connecting people and becomes instead a way of dividing them. This is the sharpest moral argument of *The Shadow Lines*. It is not that nationalism is simply wrong or that borders are simply evil. It is that the stories we tell about our losses — and the way we allow those stories to harden into convictions — can become the very source of the violence we are trying to escape. The grandmother is both a victim of communal violence and, through her nationalism, a participant in the logic that perpetuates it. Ghosh holds both of these truths together without resolving the tension between them, and this refusal to simplify is one of the novel's greatest strengths.

VI. FORM AS PHILOSOPHY: THE NOVEL'S NON-LINEAR STRUCTURE

The memory theme in *The Shadow Lines* is not just presented through the substance of the story — through memories of the people and their tragic losses that occur in the story. It is also conveyed in the form of the novel itself. Unlike most novels, which proceed through a linear chronology, *The Shadow Lines* tells its tale using an associative approach, which is the same way people move from memory to memory. That is, it jumps from the present to the past, moving from the narrator's recollection of events in his present-day life to a reconstruction of events that occurred in previous decades, from Calcutta to Dhaka. Decades like the 1930s, 1940s, 1960s, and 1980s appear in no particular order but jumbled up, overlapping, and re-examining the same point from different perspectives. The idea of historiographic metafiction developed by Linda Hutcheon is the most appropriate theoretical lens through which the formal device may be viewed. According to Hutcheon in her book entitled *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, historiographic metafiction is fiction that is consciously aware of itself as fiction and uses this awareness to question the authenticity of history as an objective and complete form of representation. It is not just a matter of narrating

history for Hutcheon; rather, it is about the manner in which history is narrated (5).

Indeed, *The Shadow Lines* can be used as an exemplar for such form of literature. It does not portray the events of Partition, the 1964 riots and even Tridib's death as some objective historical facts that happened long time ago in the past and cannot be changed any more. Instead, it represents them as memories of people, who were involved in these events in some way and whose perception was colored by emotions, different levels of knowledge and need for recollection. Thus, in this novel there is always the distinction between remembering and imagining of historical episodes, the author openly admits uncertainty and absence of information about particular details. It is not the flaw of the book, on the contrary — it demonstrates the method chosen by Ghosh to show that all the histories have their roots in imagination.

The theory of narrative memory offered by Ricoeur lends weight to this analysis. According to Ricoeur's theory, narratives are not merely accounts of past occurrences; they constitute a temporal structuring that makes the succession of events meaningful by giving them a narrative form. But in *The Shadow Lines*, this act of structuring is self-consciously performed in a non-linear fashion. The narrator repeatedly revisits the same episodes in his life — the tales told by Tridib regarding London, the memories of the grandmother regarding Dhaka, and the death of Tridib — with each iteration revealing a new significance of the event.

Such recursively, in and of itself, is a mode of argument. The argument is that knowing our past is not the act of arriving at one final and conclusive representation of it. Rather, it is the act of returning again and again to certain points in time, asking similar questions each time we return, and being open to new answers and new links. Indeed, such an act of recurring can be said to define *The Shadow Lines* as a whole — reading the novel is, itself, a process of memory.

The three cities which feature prominently in the novel, namely Calcutta, London, and Dhaka, have to be considered as what Nora would term sites of memory. These places are not objective geographical locations, but emotionally charged ones on the narrator's psychological map. They are points to which the narrator's memory keeps recurring because

here he finds an intersection of his individual past and collective history. Travelling between them, therefore, becomes more like navigating the labyrinthine corridors of memory than travelling across vast stretches of geography.

VII. CONCLUSION

The *Shadow Lines* is, among many other things, a profound meditation on what it means to remember — and what it costs us when we remember badly. Through the narrator, Ghosh shows us that memory can be generous, imaginative, and connective, a way of reaching across time and geography to understand experiences that are not our own. Through the grandmother, he shows us that memory can also harden, close in on itself, and become the source of the very violence it mourns. And through the formal architecture of the novel itself — its non-linear structure, its recursive returns, its honest acknowledgment of uncertainty and imagination — he shows us that all narrative, all history, all memory is constructed, and that the question is not whether we construct the past but how responsibly and how humanely we do so.

The theoretical frameworks of Halbwachs, Ricoeur, Benjamin, Nora, and Hutcheon each illuminate a different facet of this argument. But what gives the argument its power is not the theory but the humanity. Ghosh has written characters who feel real — a narrator whose longing for understanding is both moving and recognizable, a grandmother whose grief has curdled into nationalism in ways that are both comprehensible and devastating, a Tridib whose generosity of spirit makes his violent death all the more painful. It is this combination of theoretical sophistication and deep human sympathy that makes *The Shadow Lines* one of the most important novels of the postcolonial era.

Ultimately, what *The Shadow Lines* asks of its readers is what it asks of its narrator: to hold the complexity of memory without resolving it prematurely, to acknowledge the gaps and uncertainties in our knowledge of the past without retreating into either comfortable certainty or paralysing doubt. The shadow lines of the title are not just the borders between nations. They are the lines between memory and imagination, between the past and the present, between self and other. And Ghosh's great

achievement is to show us that these lines, however real their consequences, are always — at some level — lines we have drawn ourselves.

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